Table of Contents

1. Allegiances
2. Chapter 1
3. Chapter 2
4. Chapter 3
5. Chapter 4
6. Chapter 5
7. Chapter 6
8. Chapter 7
9. Chapter 8
10. Chapter 9
11. Chapter 10
12. Chapter 11
13. Chapter 12
14. Chapter 13
15. Chapter 14
16. Chapter 15
17. Chapter 16
18. Chapter 17
19. Chapter 18
20. Chapter 19
21. Chapter 20
22. Chapter 21
23. Chapter 22
24. Chapter 23
25. Chapter 24
26. Chapter 25
27. Chapter 26
28. Chapter 27
29. Chapter 28
30. Chapter 29
31. Chapter 30
32. Chapter 31
33. Chapter 32
34. Chapter 33

35. Chapter 34
36. Chapter 35

Allegiances

OakClan

Leader- Swiftstar: Black-and-white spotted tom with hazel eyes

Deputy- Dawnflame: Cream tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Medicine cat- Lilyrose: White-and-dark-gray she-cat with light blue eyes

Medicine cat apprentice- Blackberrythorn: Gray-and-white she-cat with green eyes

Senior warriors-
Graywolf: Gray she-cat with dark patches and orange eyes

Wolfstripe: Dusty brown tabby tom with lighter paws/muzzle and blue eyes

Poolheart: Gray-and-white tom with yellow eyes

Wildwing: Black tom with spiky fur, brown paws, and green eyes

Hailfrost: Dark-gray-patched she-cat with light green eyes and lighter patches

Larkflight: Black tom with yellow eyes
Apprentice, Hemlockpaw

Warriors-
Amberheart: Ginger-and-white she-cat with bright green eyes
Apprentice, Lilacpaw

Whorlwind: Gray tabby tom with white paws and yellow eyes

Riverwater: White she-cat with gray patches and blue eyes

Topazshine: Black-and-brown she-cat with light blue eyes

Yonderwatcher: White she-cat with gray ears, forehead, back, tail and yellow-green eyes

Rainclaw: Mottled gray tom with darker markings around his face and yellow eyes

Ripplepool: Black, white, and dark ginger calico she-cat with one blue eye and one yellow eye

Bearheart: Broad-shouldered brown tabby tom with amber eyes and dark stripes

Cypressfern: Silver tabby she-cat with long fur and pale-blue eyes

Tumblespring: Dilute calico tabby tom with green eyes

Elmstorm: Cream, gray, and brown calico tabby tom with green eyes

Elkstep: Dark gray tabby tom with white paws and amber eyes

Mooseheart: Dark brown tabby tom with white paws and golden-yellow eyes

Diverstripe: Dark gray tabby tom with black stripes and yellow eyes

Smokestream: Smoky-black she-cat with orange eyes

Dacefang: Dark gray tabby tom with amber eyes

Silverwing: Black, cream, and dark ginger tortoiseshell she-cat with blue-green eyes
Apprentice, Autumnpaw

Flamepool: Dark ginger tabby tom with green eyes

Lionflight: Dark ginger tabby tom with a thick ring of fur around his neck and golden-yellow eyes
Apprentice, Beaverpaw

Dovebreeze: Dark gray she-cat with pale patches and light green eyes

Chiveclaw: Black tom with short, spiky fur and dark green eyes

Queens-
Pearpool: Cream she-cat with pale-blue eyes (Nursery queen)

Rosefall: Dark gray tabby she-cat with orange eyes (Mother to Chiveclaw's kits: Briarkit & Thornkit)

Rowanflower: Dark ginger she-cat with lighter paws and dark green eyes (Mother to Poolheart's kits: Hopekit, Shimmerkit, and Ripplekit)

Apprentices-
Autumnpaw: Dark gray tabby she-cat with pale highlights and yellow-and-green eyes

Beaverpaw: Dark gray tom with sparse stripes, lighter markings, and light green eyes

Hemlockpaw: Dark gray tabby tom with white paws and hazel eyes

Lilacpaw: Cream-and-gray tabby she-cat with dark stripes and yellow-and-blue eyes

Pennypaw: Fluffy gray-and-white she-cat with green-and-orange eyes, a pink collar with a bell

Kits-
Briarkit: Spiky-furred, solid black she-cat with yellow eyes

Thornkit: Spiky-furred dark brown mackerel tabby tom with yellow eyes

Hopekit: Ginger-and-white she-cat with hazel eyes

Shimmerkit: Light gray and white tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Ripplekit: Ginger tabby tom with dark green eyes

Elders-
Iceleaf: White she-cat with dark green eyes

Redstripe: Ginger-and-white tom with green eyes

GlacierClan

Leader- Sparrowstar: Brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Deputy- Stormfern: Gray tabby she-cat with green eyes

Medicine cat- Poppypool: Bright red-orange tabby she-cat with bright green eyes

Medicine cat apprentice- Newtflake: Dark gray tom with white paws and yellow-green eyes

Senior warriors-
Cedarpelt: Dark gray tom with amber eyes

Adderseed: Dark gray tabby tom with amber eyes and white paws

Lizardberry: Cream-pointed tom with dark blue eyes

Warriors-
Spiritsight: Black she-cat with indigo eyes

Nutfur: Chestnut tom with amber eyes

Hickorytree: Brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Foxpelt: Dark calico she-cat with orange eyes and scars all over her body

Rosefur: Ginger she-cat with yellow eyes

Pikedive: Gray tabby tom with green eyes

Flamefrost: Yellow tabby tom with blue eyes

Sandyfrost: Pale-ginger tabby she-cat with orange eyes

Petalfire: Calico she-cat with amber eyes

Daisystep: Cream she-cat with blue eyes

Frogstep: Dark brown tabby tom with green eyes

Tawnyheart: Calico she-cat with yellow eyes

Hawkflight: Dark gray tabby tom with lighter paws, belly, muzzle, tail tip and yellow eyes

Talonclaw: Silver-and-white tabby tom with bright green eyes

Sorrelfur: 3 gray-toned she-cat with amber eyes

Nettlefoot: Sandy-colored tabby tom with orange eyes and one lighter paw

Maplewood: Golden-brown tabby she-cat with white paws and amber eyes

Crouchmist: Dark gray and white tabby tom with yellow eyes

Hatchdrop: Calico tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Troutstream: Slender blue tabby tom with light gray markings like fish scales and green eyes

Umberflame: Dark blue, ginger, and russet tabby calico she-cat and orange eyes

Hawkstreak: Silver tabby tom with yellow eyes

Furlwatcher: Rustic tabby she-cat with lighter paws and yellow eyes

Leapspeckle: Silver-and-white tabby tom with blue eyes

Foggyrain: Dark gray tabby she-cat with dark blue eyes

Ivorywhisker: Dark golden-brown tabby she-cat with white paws, chin, and markings with golden-amber eyes

Mayshade: Honey-brown tabby she-cat with white paws, dark stripes, and copper eyes

Frozenshell: Dark brown tabby tom with white paws, tail tip, and orange eyes

Queens-
Fawnstripe: Dark gray-and-white she-cat with yellow eyes (Mother to Talonclaw's kits: Hawkkit, Aspenkit, and Birchkit)

Kits-
Hawkkit- Gray-and-white mackerel tabby tom with yellow eyes

Aspenkit: Silver-and-white mackerel tabby tom with green eyes

Birchkit: Silver-and-white mackerel tabby tom with green eyes

Elders-
Otterfire: Brown tom with orange eyes

Darkeyes: White she-cat with black ears, paws, muzzle, and tail with indigo eyes

DawnClan

Leader- Emberstar: Tortoiseshell tom with dark red/ginger patches and bright purple eyes

Deputy- Gingerheart: Bright ginger tabby tom with piercing blue eyes and dark stripes

Medicine cats- Splashnose: Dark blue swirled tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Sunnyshine: Yellow tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Medicine cat apprentice- Orchidfern: Flame-pointed she-cat with a stump for a tail and one blue eye and one gold eye

Senior warriors-
Fennelfur: Sandy-colored she-cat with blue eyes

Mistlesky: Dark blue-gray tabby she-cat with lighter paws and blue eyes

Warriors-
Coppersight: Rustic ginger tabby she-cat with orange eyes

Fallingash: Cream tabby she-cat with bright blue eyes

Hollyfire: Tortoiseshell she-cat with red patches and holly-colored eyes

Mosspelt: Gray-and-white splotched she-cat with bright orange eyes

Berrystream: Blue tabby tom with orange eyes

Bumblefall: Rusty ginger tabby she-cat with green eyes

Bouldertalon: White-and-gray patched tom with light yellow eyes

Mistflight: Pale blue-gray tabby she-cat with pale blue eyes

Deafears: Black tom with white patches and amber eyes

Snakefoot: Large, slender gray-and-white tom with green eyes and small paws

Russetpelt: Dark ginger tabby she-cat with light yellow eyes

Whiskerflame: Tortoiseshell tom with lighter red patches and orange eyes

Acornheart: Chestnut-colored she-cat with a bushy ginger tail and yellow eyes

Owlheart: Dark blue tabby tom with lighter paws and pale yellow eyes

Snowhawk: Large snow-white tom with bright yellow eyes

Rootspeckle: Muted-yellow she-cat with one dark paw, one light paw, a light tail tip with two stripes on her tail, and light purple eyes

Moonleaf: Cream-and-white tabby she-cat with green eyes
Apprentice, Mothpaw

Sablestorm: Oak-brown tabby she-cat with lighter paws and orange eyes

Apprentice, Halfpaw

Flowerwing: Rustic tabby she-cat with green eyes

Scorchblaze: Dilute calico tom with yellow-green eyes

Sandheart: Cream tabby she-cat with pale blue eyes

Hazewing: Yellow-and-cream tabby tom with blue eyes

Mintleaf: Minty-blue tabby she-cat with white paws and teal eyes
Apprentice, Grasspaw

Bluewhisker: Blue-gray she-cat with dark cream patches and yellow eyes

Flutterbird: Dark cream tabby tom with white markings and blue eyes

Azuregaze: Creamy-white she-cat with dark cream stripes with one blue eye and one yellow eye

Turtleshell: Dark gray, cream, and white calico tabby tom with green eyes

Rainsweptfire: Red-gray tabby she-cat with dark stripes and orange eyes

Jackdawfeather: Red-brown tabby tom with dark stripes, white paws, and green eyes

Rowanwillow: Sandy-colored tabby she-cat with green eyes and lighter paws

Lappingblizzard: Brown tabby she-cat with bright blue-green eyes and dark stripes

Nectarshine: Golden-brown tabby she-cat with dark stripes and one blue eye and one green eye

Pinestorm: Oak-brown tabby tom with dark stripes and pale-blue eyes

Mossleap: Blue-gray she-cat with lighter paws and green eyes

Lavenderflower: Pinkish-gray she-cat with a dark forehead, back, tail, with a lighter muzzle, chest, underbelly, paws, tail tip and blue eyes

Apprentices-
Grasspaw: Gray, white, and ginger calico tabby she-cat with one orange eye and one blue eye

Halfpaw: Half gray, half ginger tom with bright blue eyes

Mothpaw: Gray she-cat with a white face mask and purple eyes

Queens-
Splashnose: Dark blue swirled tabby she-cat with amber eyes (Mother to Sunnyshine's kits: Featherkit, Moonkit, Briarkit, and Peachkit)

Snowshine: Snow-white she-cat with one blue eye and one yellow eye (Mother to Lizardberry's kits: Emberkit, Hollykit, Yewkit, and Cardinalkit)

Nightwind: Dark brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes (Mother to Scorchblaze's kit: Sootkit)

Kits-

Featherkit: Dilute calico-tabby tom with blue eyes

Moonkit: Dark blue tabby tom with amber eyes

Briarkit: Honey-brown tabby she-cat with amber-and-blue eyes

Peachkit: Cream, brown, and ginger calico-tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Emberkit: Cream lynx-pointed tom with blue eyes

Hollykit: Calico she-cat with yellow eyes

Yewkit: White-and-ginger tom with yellow eyes

Cardinalkit: Cream lynx-point she-cat with blue eyes

Sootkit: Dark brown tabby she-cat with yellow-green eyes

Elders-
Halfsnow: Golden brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Poppybee: Pale tabby she-cat with light blue eyes

Tornface: Cherry-red tabby she-cat with a scarred face, chest, and front legs with one right pale blue eye and a stump for a tail

Stoneblaze: Blue-gray tom with pale blue eyes and dark ears, tail, and paws

Leaffire: Brown-and-white tabby she-cat with light blue eyes and a deep bite scar on her throat

NightClan

Leader- Maplestar: Tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with yellow eyes

Deputy- Heronstripe: White she-cat with a green left eye and blue right eye

Medicine cat- Poolripple: Pale brown tom with orange eyes

Senior warriors-
Shredsplash: Blue tabby she-cat with shredded ears and amber eyes
Apprentice, Avianpaw

Firestripe: Ginger tabby tom with amber eyes

Warriors-
Shelltail: Brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Brokenflower: Black she-cat with blue eyes

Cloverheart: Calico she-cat with blue eyes
Apprentice, Serpentpaw

Otterflower: Brown she-cat with green eyes

Skiptail: White she-cat with black paws, ear tips, tail tip, and orange eyes

Jaggedsong: Light brown she-cat with light green eyes and lighter paws

Birchspring: Brown tabby she-cat with dark stripes and amber eyes

Barksplash: Dark red-brown tabby tom with large paws and amber eyes

Alderfall: Red-orange tabby tom with yellow eyes and white markings

Flamewhisker: Red-brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Apprentices-
Avianpaw: Black, white, and brown calico she-cat with purple eyes

Serpentpaw: Brown tabby tom with dark stripes, white highlights, and blue eyes

Queens-
Snowmask: Black she-cat with a white face and blue eyes (Mother to Firestripe's kits: Hawthornkit & Barleykit)

Brightnose: Black-and-white she-cat with asymmetrical patches with purple-blue eyes (Mother to Shelltail's kits: Nettlekit, Beechkit, Larkkit, Juniperkit, and Swankit)

Kits-
Hawthornkit: Ginger, black, and white calico-tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Barleykit: Chimera tom with amber-and-blue eyes

Nettlekit: Black-and-white tom with amber eyes

Beechkit: Pale-brown tabby she-cat with white splotches and half-blue, half-purple eyes

Larkkit: Black she-cat with white paws and purple eyes

Juniperkit: White tom with black paws and amber eyes

Swankit: White she-cat with a black face mask and blue-and-amber eyes

Chapter 1

Poppypool basked in the sunlight as she laid on the sun-warmed stone outside her den in the GlacierClan camp. She purred softly as she let her fur soak in the welcome sunlight after the relatively calm leafbare that just passed. *Newleaf is here at last.* She thought as she turned her head and gazed out at the Clan. Even at sunhigh, the camp was bustling with life and it brought a gentle smile to her face as she watched the cats she fought so hard to keep alive during the cold moons.

Spiritsight was conversing with her mate Hickorytree whilst sharing a rabbit at their paws. The black she-cat fought hard to overcome her greencough, emerging with only a mild, lingering cough– a harmless and normal aftereffect of her severe case of the illness. Now, Poppypool was watching the indigo-eyed she-cat carefully for any indication of having a litter of kits with her new mate.

A dark gray pelt caught her eye as she watched her apprentice duck into the elder's den, a bundle of herbs clasped between his jaws. Poppypool smiled fondly as Newtflake disappeared inside the cave, proud of how far he'd come since first becoming her apprentice. He'd been nervous and timid as a young tom, afraid of making a mistake and accidentally causing another cat harm. When Poppypool agreed to take him on as her apprentice, he'd expressed to her that the thought of hurting another cat made him feel sick and shaky. Poppypool hadn't thought of having an apprentice at such a young age, but was eager to train Newtpaw to be a knowledgeable and skilled medicine cat.

Now that he'd earned his full name a few moons ago, Poppypool could relax and let him run things for a while before she joined in on the daily routines. During leafbare, Poppypool leaned on Newtflake a lot for support. Her mother had fallen ill with greencough and Poppypool wasn't sure if Tawnyheart would survive. Newtflake took on a lot of the burden of helping his mentor's mother, giving her herbs, cleaning her nest, and bringing

her food. Poppypool was relieved and forever thankful when Tawnyheart recovered from her illness and returned to her warrior duties.

Greencough and whitecough had also entered the nursery as well. The young kits of Fawnstripe and Talonclaw were relatively unaffected other than one– Birchkit's case of whitecough hadn't quite developed into greencough thanks to quick thinking and isolation. He'd returned to the nursery a few days beforehand and seemed ecstatic to get out of the stuffy medicine den.

"You look quite comfortable," purred a voice as a dark gray-and-cream tabby tom padded up to the lounging she-cat. Poppypool rolled her eyes and sat up, her tail flicking with amusement. "Don't you have herbs to collect and sort through? Or elders to give their medicine to?"

Poppypool flicked the tom's shoulder with her tail-tip. "Newtflake is handling the elders, and I have all of my herbs." She sniffed, feigning offense as she broke into a smile. "Don't you have some hunting to do? Isn't there an OakClan patrol you need to be attacking?" The two shared a laugh before pressing their heads together affectionately. "How are you doing, Hawkflight?"

Her brother pulled away, his eyes shining in the sunlight. "I'm okay, I guess," he shrugged. "Mom's been paranoid and untrusting, as usual. I don't know how to help her." He sighed, his shoulders slumping as he spoke. "I wish you had a plant that could help her. It can't be healthy to live like...that."

"I wish I could help her more than I have." Poppypool confessed as she gazed out at the Clan. "She refuses to talk to me about what she's going through, only asking for poppyseeds to help with sleep and chamomile to calm her. Sometimes, even other cats bring her to me when she's erratic and behaving strongly."

The two siblings fell into silence as they watched the camp together. They didn't dare bring up their father within the camp walls, knowing very well that his name was scorned by the entirety of GlacierClan. Tawnyheart especially would be thrown into a fit if she heard her kits discussing the cat who fathered them. It wasn't

without good reason, though. Poppypool knew Rowantail was a disgraceful tom who had betrayed his Clan and killed Deerstripe and Gorsewhisper of OakClan before being exiled during a Gathering. It was before Poppypool and Hawkflight were born, but she could retell the story as if she'd been present like a bird on a branch watching the scene unfold.

"Do you think..." she began slowly, choosing her words carefully. "If *he* didn't get exiled, do you think we would've been raised differently? Maybe had a happy family?"

Hawkflight breathed in sharply, his eyes darkening. "I think him being exiled was for the best," he replied curtly. "I wouldn't want to live with a murderous traitor in the Clan, let alone be raised by one." His shoulders tensed as he continued. "I think if he wasn't exiled, him and Mom would've raised us differently, in a less stable relationship than what happened."

Poppypool nodded, accepting his response and dropping the subject. Despite not knowing their father, neither of them liked talking about him. They couldn't talk about him to anyone other than each other, and even that was uncomfortable and awkward. She let out a quiet sigh and glanced at her brother. "Sometimes I wonder what having a father is like, you know?"

"Yeah, I get it," Hawkflight nodded. "Maybe one day Mom will have another mate and be happy to raise more kits in a happy, healthy, stable environment." He smiled at that, seeming at ease. "I'd love to have some little siblings running at my heels."

"What about kits of your own?" Poppypool asked. She hadn't seen her brother be particularly interested in any cat in the Clan– she-cat or tom, and she had doubts if he wanted a mate or kits. "Would you want to have a mate and kits? Or maybe just kits or just a mate?"

Hawkflight shrugged his broad shoulders. "I don't know, I haven't really met anyone that's caught my eye." He flicked his tail toward the nursery. "Talonclaw and Fawnstripe's kits keep to their family most of the time, apart from when they visit Otterfire and Darkeyes in the elder's den. I don't know if I'd be a good father; Especially since we have *him* as an example." He curled his lip with disdain

and Poppypool nodded in understanding.

"Maybe you'll find someone someday."

Her brother grunted. "Yeah, maybe." He rose to his paws and touched noses with his sister. "I should see if Stormfern wants me on any patrols. StarClan knows she has a knack for keeping cats' paws busy no matter what." He lingered for a moment longer, seeming hesitant. "Do you think I'd be a good father?" He asked, his voice quiet and unsure.

"I think you'll be a much better father than Rowantail ever could've wanted to be." Poppypool felt so sure of her words and she hoped it came across in her voice as she gazed at her brother. "If you have kits of your own, you'll be a great father to them. I'm sure of it."

Hawkflight gave her a gentle smile before padding away, his tail flicking dust at Poppypool as he left.

Even though Hawkflight had left her alone again, Poppypool still felt as though someone was with her. She glanced to her left and then her right, but didn't see anyone or anything. *I'm probably just imagining it.* She shook out her pelt to dislodge the feeling and got to her paws.

Newtflake emerged from the elder's den, his bundle of herbs now just a barren harness of beech leaves. "Hi, Poppypool!" He called out to his mentor, trotting towards her with his tail held high in the air. "Did you have a good nap? The sun feels really good."

The usual smile that came with talking to her bubbly apprentice crept across her muzzle familiarly as she broke into a steady purr. "I managed to doze off pretty well before Hawkflight came by and we chatted." She curled her tail around Newtflake's shoulder and they headed for their shared den side-by-side. "Did the elders have anything to say today?"

"Well, Otterfire is certain that Petalfire is going to be retiring here soon, but he's been saying that since he retired." They entered the den and Newtflake slipped the harness off of his body and hung it up on a twig hanging off of a stone near the entrance. The familiar

gray-stone cave welcomed them as the sunlight filtered through the lichen that overhung the entrance. "Darkeyes' whitecough seems to have completely gone and she's about to have her ears fall off from how much Otterfire gloats about his grandkits and their goings on."

Poppypool chuckled, settling herself down at the smooth-stone slab at the left side of the den that provided excellent room for herb sorting. "If there's one thing that cat loves more than his mate, it's his grandkits." She spoke while she cleaned up the sorting slab, brushing away dead leaf crumbs and stashing the remaining sorted herbs away where they belonged. The holes and small crevices in the walls provided the convenient storage, carved out seasons ago from flooding and erosion. Now, it served as a necessary part of the medicine cats' daily chores. "Did you check on Birchkit? Fawnstripe has been fussing over him since we sent him back to the nursery."

"He's as healthy as a badger," her apprentice reported with a wave of his tail. "No rattling in his chest or lingering cough like I expected. His nose stopped running and he's back to chasing around his littermates like he used to." Newtflake came up beside his mentor at the slab and propped his front paws up on the smooth-stone, seemingly pondering something. "Have you...noticed anything off about how Orchidfern treats me at our meetings?" He asked, his voice sounding awkward and hesitant. "She's always shy around me and lays with me when we're at the Moonpool."

Poppypool had, in fact, noticed all of the things Newtflake was describing to her. The young DawnClan she-cat wasn't exactly hiding her feelings for Newtflake, especially during the sacred meetings every half-moon. Orchidfern was a kind-hearted, soft-spoken, and gentle she-cat with a big heart. *They'd be good together.* The thought came without Poppypool expecting it, but she didn't disagree with it. "Yes, I've taken special note of her...behavior. How do you feel about it?"

"W-well I- uh..." Newtflake cleared his throat and looked away, his ears pulling back with clear embarrassment. Poppypool looked at her apprentice, somewhat amused. "Sh-she's a sweet cat and I do like her...but it's against the code for medicine cats to take mates– especially with a cat from another Clan." His fur fluffed up and he licked his chest bashfully. "I-I just...don't entirely know what to do

about this."

Poppypool was quiet for a moment. *Blackheart has his relationship with Specklewatcher, but she wasn't a medicine cat.* She stifled a snort. *Even then, look at what happened.* She nudged Newtflake's shoulder gently with a paw. He turned and looked at her, his eyes unsure and nervous. "I think you should talk to her and then see what StarClan thinks during the next meeting. If StarClan approves of your relationship, then so do I."

Relief flashed in Newtflake's eyes and he let out a deep sigh. "Thank you, Poppypool." He meowed and dipped his head to his mentor. "I wasn't sure how you'd react to anything like that. I'll talk to her at the next meeting for sure."

"You're my apprentice and my fellow medicine cat," she mewed, her whiskers twitching. "I trust you to not act outside of StarClan's will. I'm glad you told me about this and I hope you can start a relationship with Orchidfern someday." She smiled at her apprentice for a few moments longer before she flicked her tail. "Now, let's see if we can go get some more tansy and watermint. Treating Birchkit used up most of our supplies and I'd like to be prepared in case sickness flares up again."

Newtflake nodded and moved away from the slab, seeming relieved to have the subject changed. "Let's go before it gets too dark!" He meowed and together, they headed out of the den.

Chapter 2

Poppypool hung her head in shame as the light died from Darkeyes' gaze. The elders' tail twitched, her paw jerked, and then she lay still. She was dead from a preventable disease that Poppypool *had* the herbs to cure. Instead, her long life was cut short due to... what? It wasn't incompetence, surely. Poppypool felt her mouth go dry as she stood up and stalked away, unable to bear the sight of the dead elder.

"Poppypool?" Newtflake's voice was quiet and she could barely hear him. She felt numb and useless. She'd trained in a volatile state of the Clans to do everything she could to heal her Clanmates, yet Darkeyes died from a common sickness that any cat could've caught. "Are...are you okay?"

Poppypool felt his eyes burning into her pelt as she stared at the stone wall of the den. She felt powerless and like she'd led Darkeyes down. She'd trusted Poppypool to help with her runny nose and cough, and now she was warm and dead in the floor of the medicine den. No, Poppypool wasn't okay. Failing wasn't okay. She couldn't fail. Too much weighed on her shoulders for the *thought* of failing to cross her mind. She drew in a heavy breath and raised her head, trying to ground herself.

"Get her ready for her vigil," she meowed without turning to look at Newtflake. "She loved lavender, so make sure to put some sprigs in her pelt. I'll go tell the Clan of her passing." *Of my failure to save her.* Poppypool forced her paws into motion and headed out of the den, not so much as glancing at the beloved dead elder as she went. She exited the den and was faced with the concerned gazes of her Clanmates. Some of them had hopeful expressions, others had grim looks despite not knowing of Darkeyes' fate.

"Poppypool?" Spiritsight, Darkeyes' only kit, spoke up next to Hickorytree. The two mates seemed fearful, but the purple-eyed she-cat looked distraught. "I-is she...?"

Poppypool held her gaze for a moment that seemed to stretch on for ages before bowing her head sadly. Spiritsight let out a mournful, heartbreaking wail and fell against Hickorytree's side while he comforted her. "I'm so sorry, Spiritsight." She whispered, not daring to look up at the grieving warrior. Her heart ached as a cloud of sorrow and grief settled over the heads of the GlacierClan cats. Pain nipped at her chest as she forced herself to look up and meet the eyes of her sad Clanmates. "I-I did everything I could..."

"Sh-she'll never meet her grandkits..." Spiritsight sobbed into Hickorytree's chest while the brown tabby tom wrapped his paws around her and held her close.

"N-Newtflake is getting her body ready for tonight's vigil," the medicine cat's voice shook as she tried to stay put together. "I...I'm sorry, I can't..." Poppypool quickly hurried away, unable to bear the pained eyes of her Clanmates burning into her pelt while Spiritsight cried into her mate's fur.

As Poppypool left the devastated cats to mourn, a flash of a multi-colored pelt stopped her in her tracks. Hawkflight stood in front of her, his eyes brimming with concern and sadness as Poppypool lowered her ears.

"Poppy, are you okay?" His voice was gentle and caring, but Poppypool could hear the underlying note of grief in his tone.

Poppypool flinched at the sound of his voice, her paws shifting uneasily. The gentleness and caring nature in his words made her heart twist, but it was the grief and guilt inside that nearly made her break. Her throat tightened, and she forced herself to meet his gaze, though it felt as though she was carrying the weight of the world's guilt on her shoulders.

"I'm fine," she whispered, her voice too soft, too uncertain. The lie tasted bitter on her tongue, but she swallowed it down, hoping he didn't see the guilt darkening her eyes.

Her brother's ears flicked at her response, his eyes narrowing slightly. It was clear he heard the slight tremble in her voice and saw how she couldn't hardly bear meeting his gaze. The tight

sibling relationship they'd built felt distant, replaced by a wall she desperately tried to keep up.

"Poppy, you don't seem fine," he said gently, but there was a quiet and gentle firmness in his tone. His tail twitched anxiously as he stepped closer, searching her eyes for answers. "I know how hard you take losing your patients. You know you can talk to me, right?"

His concern was genuine, and Poppypool did appreciate him checking in on her. She felt touched that he went out of his way to ask if she was okay, even though she was very clearly not.

Poppypool's heart squeezed painfully tight at his words. His concern, his closeness, made her feel both comforted and trapped. He was right– she wasn't fine, and the thought that he noticed made her feel both grateful and terrified. How could she explain to him that Darkeyes' death was completely preventable, but she didn't think her sickness would progress at all?

"I..." She started, her voice catching in her throat. She wanted to confide in him, to let his warmth soothe the raging storm in her chest, but Darkeyes' lifeless eyes flashed in her mind. He wouldn't understand.

She blinked quickly, swallowing the lump that raised in her throat, and forced a small, strained smile. "I just... I've been tired," she said, her voice barely a whisper. "It's nothing, just medicine cat stuff. You don't need to worry." But as soon as the words left her mouth, she could feel the hollowness in them. The lie. And she hated herself for it.

Hawkflight's gaze softened, but the fur along his spine bristled with unease. It was clear he knew she was hiding the truth.

"Poppy," he murmured, stepping closer until their fur brushed, but he kept his voice calm, as though he didn't want to push her too hard. "You've been working yourself to the bone since the outbreak. You've been distant for moons now. I know how much you care about your patients, but this feels... different. Please, just talk to me."

His eyes searched hers, a mix of worry and a quiet plea. Poppypool knew that he only wanted to help and ease her stress, but she couldn't involve him with the goings-on of a medicine cat. They were in two vastly different roles and the distance was prominent.

Stormfern's commanding voice interrupted the tension hanging between them. "Hawkflight, you're needed on the hunting patrol." The deputy's tone was sad, but it also left no room for argument, though it wasn't without patience.

Hawkflight's ears flicked, frustration flashing across his face. He glanced at Poppypool, concern still clouding his eyes. "But–" He hesitated, reluctance clear as he shifted his weight from paw to paw. Then he sighed, seeming resigned. "I'll talk to you later, okay?" His voice was soft, a promise in his words.

Poppypool only nodded stiffly, watching as Stormfern gave Hawkflight an expectant look. Without another word, Hawkflight turned and padded away, his tail flicking with uncertainty, casting one last worried glance over his shoulder as he went.

As he joined up with Nutfur, Flamefrost, and Daisystep for the patrol, Poppypool's chest tightened even more. She'd avoided his questions, but how long could she keep that up?

*****

Preparations for Darkeyes' vigil went smoothly. Poppypool had assigned Newtflake to arrange Darkeyes' body to make it look like she was sleeping, which wasn't difficult. She stood over the elder, the sprigs of lavender and heather plants nestled in her white-and-black fur looked pleasing to the eye and Poppypool was grimly satisfied with it.

She glanced up from the body to gaze around the Clan. The clearing was sparse with cats who were ready for the vigil. Spiritsight and Hickorytree were crouched nearby, their pelts brushing. The black she-cat's eyes were bloodshot with tears and her cheeks were stained with all of the crying. Hickorytree had his tail wrapped around her, and it seemed like he was grieving as much as she was without showing it.

Poppypool let out a small sigh and looked back to Darkeyes' body until pawsteps approaching caught her attention and she looked up.

Newtflake padded softly toward his mentor, his gaze falling on Darkeyes' lifeless body before shifting to Poppypool. She sat still, as if frozen by the weight of her guilt, her tail curled tightly around her paws. The air was thick with grief, and Newflake seemed to hesitate for a moment, as though he was unsure of what to say.

Finally, he stepped closer, his voice low and gentle. "Poppypool..." he began, "I know how much Darkeyes meant to the Clan and to you. She was a great warrior and the Clan won't forget her." He sat down beside her, their pelts brushing. "You know I'm here if you need me. You've been there for so many of us...let me be there for you this time."

He glanced up at her when she didn't respond, his eyes soft with understanding. "You did everything you could, and she knows that."

Poppypool's eyes remained fixated on Darkeyes' body, the emptiness and guilt inside her growing. Newtflake's words washed over her, so kind and supportive, but they felt distant, like a voice calling from far away. How could she tell the cat *she* trained about her feelings of failure as a medicine cat? How could she admit to doing everything she could, but that she failed? Would StarClan guide her, or would Darkeyes' death unravel her?

She swallowed hard and turned her head slightly, only enough to acknowledge her apprentice's presence beside her. "Thank you, Newtflake," she whispered, her voice tight with emotion. "I'm glad you're here."

Even as she spoke, the images of Darkeyes' coughing fits and streaming nose flashed in her mind. Could she still be GlacierClan's medicine cat if she couldn't cure a disease they'd been fighting for generations?

Newtflake watched her carefully. He leaned in closer, his voice soft but earnest. "You've been through a lot, Poppypool. It's okay if you need time...but please don't shut me out. I know Darkeyes' death is weighing on you greatly." His eyes were filled with concern, and

Poppypool blinked away unshed tears. "Whatever it is that's bothering you, you can talk to me."

Newtflake was only trying to help, but the grief and guilt weighed crushingly on her shoulders and suffocating her.

"Thank you, Newtflake." Her voice trembled as she forced herself to meet his gaze. "Will...you speak at Darkeyes' vigil tonight? I think I'm going to turn in early after what happened today."

Her apprentice nodded and bumped his head against her shoulder. "Of course," he mewed, seeming relieved that she'd opened up slightly. "You get your rest and I'll take care of things for as long as you need."

Poppypool gave him an appreciative nod and rose to her paws. She gave Darkeyes' body one final, long look before she stepped around the body and headed for their shared den. As she entered the cave, Poppypool couldn't help but yawn. The day had been emotionally draining and Poppypool didn't realize how exhausted she was until she was stepping into her nest.

Poppypool curled up in her nest, her body exhausted, but her mind refusing to rest. The weight of Darkeyes' death pressed down on her chest like a stone. She knew she should've been out there with her Clan, paying respects to the beloved elder who suffered a horrible death. But how could she face them when she could barely face herself?

I'm supposed to save lives, not watch them slip through my paws.

Her stomach churned at the thought. She had convinced herself that training during Nightstar's reign of terror in the Clans would mold her into the best medicine cat GlacierClan could ask for, but was she wrong? She wanted to be better and heal her Clanmates, yet a cough turned into whitecough, disappeared, and came back as greencough and quickly killed Darkeyes.

Newtflake's concerned voice echoed in her mind. He trusted her, depended on her. And she'd left him to speak at Darkeyes' vigil– an act of cowardice yet again. How long would it take until he realized

his mentor was still learning and was just a coward?

Her breath hitched, her body trembling as she buried her face in her paws, squeezing her eyes shut to block out the world and the neverending thoughts swirling in her mind. If more cats died under her care, what would happen to her? Would she be forced to step down? Be exiled?

*****

Poppypool stirred in her nest, her sleep restless and fitful. She'd barely drifted off before the familiar scents of the forest filled her nose– but something was wrong. The air was damp and thick, the ground beneath her paws wasn't solid– just a neverending river of...mud? She wasn't sure. This wasn't the forest she knew.

She rose to her paws, her heart thundering in her chest as she realized she was indeed asleep and dreaming, yet everything felt so real. Trees loomed ominously overhead, casting long, unnatural shadows that made her pelt prickle with unease. The moon above was hidden behind thick clouds, leaving the world around her in dim, suffocating darkness.

"Poppy."

The voice–smooth, cold, and terrifyingly familiar– send a jolt through her. She froze, her breath catching in her throat.

It can't be.

Slowly, she turned toward the voice, and there, emerging from the shadows, was Rowantail. Her father. His brown pelt rippled with the cold darkness of the forest, his eyes gleaming like shards of ice in the dim light. There was a slash across his throat that oozed black blood and added to the muddy river.

"Rowantail?" Her voice trembled, her paws rooted to the ground. "But... you're dead."

Rowantail gave her a cold, chilling smile. "Death doesn't end everything, Poppy. It only gives new opportunities to cats." He stepped closer, his gaze piercing her like a predator stalking its

prey. "I've been watching you. You've grown into a fine healer, but there's so much more you could be."

Poppypool recoiled, her fur bristling. "What do you mean? Why am I here?"

Rowantail circled her, his movements slow, deliberate, like a shadow haunting her every step. "You're here because you're my daughter. Because you're strong... and because you deserve more than what this weak, fragile Clan can offer." His voice was smooth, dripping with charisma, but there was something darker beneath the surface. "You've seen how they fall. How they suffer and grieve. You could do so much more, Poppy. You could save them...in ways they don't even realize."

Poppypool's heart raced, her mind spinning. "Save them? How? What are you talking about?" She took a step back, her eyes wide with confusion and fear.

Rowantail stopped, his gaze locking onto hers. "You know what I mean. The herbs, the poisons...there's power in your paws, Poppy. Power to cleanse our Clan of weakness, of those who don't deserve to thrive. You can make them stronger, better, under my guidance."

Her stomach twisted with revulsion. "No! That's not what I do. I heal, I help them."

Rowantail's eyes narrowed, his tone darkening. "And what good has that done? You've watched them die, haven't you? Despite your efforts, they fall, one by one. Just like Darkeyes. But you...you could be more than a mere healer. You could be the one to shape the Clan's future, to rid it of its flaws. Think of it as a necessary sacrifice...for a greater good."

Poppypool's legs trembled beneath her, the push and pull of his words pulling at the edges of her mind. The temptation was there...but she shook her head, trying to clear the fog of confusion. "No...this is wrong. You're wrong."

Rowantail's voice lowered, a soft whisper that wrapped around her like a vine. "You're my daughter, Poppy. This is in your blood. You

don't have to fight it. Let me help show you what you're capable of."

Her breath hitched, fear and doubt clawing at her. She wanted to run, to wake up, but something kept her rooted to the spot. Rowantail's presence was suffocating, his influence like a dark cloud wrapping tighter around her heart. The more he spoke, the harder it became to think clearly.

And then, with a final, slow step forward, Rowantail leaned in close, his voice a chilling whisper in her ear.

"I'll be seeing you again soon."

Chapter 3

Poppypool jolted awake, her breath coming in short, panicked bursts. Her nest was scattered on the floor, the fur along her spine standing on end. The den was quiet, other than the gasping breaths coming from the medicine cat. For a moment, she thought she could still feel Rowantail's presence, his icy breath on her fur, but when she looked around, only shadows lingered.

It was just a dream, she told herself, her heart racing. *Just a dream.*

But it didn't feel like a dream. His voice had been too real, too close. The words still echoed in her mind: *You deserve more than what this weak, fragile Clan can offer.*

She shivered, shaking her head to clear the fog. She had to focus, had to push the thoughts of Rowantail and the dream away. She was a healer, not some twisted puppet for her father to control to achieve his dark ambitions. Poppypool took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. The Clan needed her, and there was no time to dwell on nightmares.

Rising to her paws, she stepped out of the den and into the early dawn light. The sky was painted with soft streaks of pink and orange, a peaceful contrast to the turmoil roiling inside her. She could hear the quiet murmurs of her Clanmates beginning their morning routines, but she felt a strange distance between herself and the rest of the world.

Newtflake was already awake, busy collecting long clumps of grass near the edge of the camp. His dark gray-and-white pelt glistened with dew as he worked methodically, a picture of calm focus. Poppypool's chest tightened with guilt. She had left him with the sole responsibility of Darkeyes' vigil, too caught up in her own thoughts and feelings to stay. But she couldn't avoid him forever.

She padded over to her apprentice, forcing her paws to move despite the stone-like feeling in her limbs. Newtflake glanced up at

her, his eyes warm but questioning.

"You were moving in your sleep a lot last night," he said softly, his voice curious. "Are you feeling alright?"

Poppypool nodded stiffly. "I...I just needed to rest. I'm sorry for leaving you with the vigil."

Newtflake shook his head. "It's alright. You've been working so hard lately with the kits and sickness. Everyone needs time to recover."

The sincerity in his voice made her stomach twist. She wasn't just exhausted from her duties– but she couldn't begin to explain her dream from the night before. The weight of her father's words hung over her like a storm cloud.

Poppypool forced a smile, though it didn't reach her eyes. "Thank you, Newtflake. You're becoming a fine medicine cat."

But as she spoke, her mind flickered back to Rowantail's words. *You could be so much more.* She shook her head, trying to push the thought away, but it clung to her like a burr, prickling at the back of her mind.

"Poppypool?" Newtflake's voice broke into her thoughts, drawing her attention back to the present. "Are you sure you're okay? You seem...distracted."

She blinked, startled at his observation. Was it that obvious? She opened her mouth to reassure him, to give the same hollow answers she'd been giving him and Hawkflight, but something stopped her. The lie felt heavier today, harder to speak.

"I'm just...tired," she finally said, her voice quieter than she intended. "I didn't get much sleep last night and there's a lot on my mind."

Newtflake nodded, though the concern in his eyes still remained. "If you ever need to talk, you know I'm here, right?"

Poppypool's throat tightened, and she forced herself to nod. "I know. Thank you."

But she couldn't talk to him. Not about Rowantail and the dream she had. If he knew, he'd never look at her the same way again.

As the day wore on, Poppypool found herself lost in her work, pulling a prickle from Foggyrain's paw, gathering heather to rebuild her nest, and going through the motions as a medicine cat. But every time she closed her eyes, she could see Rowantail's face, hear his voice, soft and persuasive.

That night, when she laid in her rebuilt nest, sleep didn't come easily. She tossed and turned, her heart pounding in her chest. What if he came to her again? What if this wasn't just a dream, but something real– something she couldn't escape?

As the shadows of in the den deepened, she heard it: a faint whisper, just on the edge of her consciousness.

"Poppy..."

Her eyes shot open, but the den was empty other than Newtflake sleeping nearby. Still, the voice lingered, chilling her to the bone.

"I'll be waiting..."

*****

Poppypool was exhausted. The days felt endless, the nights sleepless, but at least for the past two moons, the nightmares had been quiet. Rowantail hadn't appeared since their first meeting, and slowly, she began to believe that maybe– just maybe– it had all been some dark, fleeting dream. She tried to focus on her duties, pretending everything was normal. But deep down, she always knew the silence wouldn't last.

That night, as she finally drifted into an uneasy sleep, the familiar cold of the Dark Forest washed over her, welcoming her back.

The trees were even darker than she remembered, their twisted branches clawing at the sky. Shadows clung to every corner of the landscape, and the muddy ground sucked at her fur and stuck to her limbs. A shiver ran through her body as she scanned the clearing.

But she didn't have to wait long.

From the gloom, Rowantail emerged, his steps silent and deliberate, his presence filling the space with an oppressive weight. His yellow eyes gleamed in the darkness, and his smile was slow, predatory.

"You've been quiet, Poppy," Rowantail purred, his voice as cold as the air around them. "I was starting to think you'd forgotten me."

Poppypool stiffened, her heart hammering in her chest. "I thought...it was just a dream," she murmured, though she didn't believe her own words.

Rowantail chuckled, a low, dark sound that sent a chill down her spine. "Oh no, my dear. This is far from just a dream. I've given you time–time to reflect, time to realize the truth."

Poppypool swallowed hard, taking a step back. "What truth?"

His eyes narrowed as he circled her slowly, like a vulture waiting to strike. "The truth that you can't run from what you are. You're my daughter, and you were meant for so much more than wasting your life patching up wounds and gathering herbs. You've tasted what real power feels like, haven't you?"

Poppypool's chest tightened. She hadn't lost any of her Clanmates since that terrible night with Darkeyes two moons ago. She'd made sure none of them had to worry about losing their life. But Rowantail's voice had lingered in her thoughts, whispering doubts, twisting her mind. She had thought about it. The temptation to follow his dark path had been creeping into her thoughts, even if she'd tried to fight it.

"I...I haven't done anything," she stammered, blood roaring in her ears.

Rowantail paused in his pacing, his gaze sharp and piercing. "Not *yet*. But you've thought about it. You've felt it, haven't you? The weakness in them, the flaws. You know as well as I do that some cats aren't worth saving."

Poppypool's ears flattened against her head. "That's not true," she

muttered, though the conviction in her voice had faded.

He stepped closer, his voice lowering to a dangerous whisper. "Oh, but it is. You know what it feels like to hold a cat's life in your paws. To decide who lives and who dies. You could change everything, Poppy. Shape the Clan into something greater, better. Don't tell me you haven't considered it."

Her breath hitched, memories of every time she had hesitated at the sight of a wounded or sick Clanmate flashing before her eyes. She had begun to doubt herself, to wonder if she was doing more harm than good by saving cats who weren't strong enough to survive on their own. Her heart pounded in her chest, fear and guilt warring inside her.

"I'm not like you," she whispered, her voice trembling. "I don't want to hurt anyone."

Rowantail's eyes gleamed with a dark satisfaction. "You already have."

His words struck her like a blow, and her mind raced back to Darkeyes. The herbs, the poison. The little bit of water hemlock she'd mixed in with his herbs... She had done it. She had killed him. The weight of the truth came crashing down on her, and she couldn't breathe. *I did it to end his suffering.*

Rowantail took another step closer, his voice soft but commanding. "You've already crossed the line, Poppy. There's no turning back now. But I can help you. Together, we can make our Clan stronger. You don't have to fight it anymore. You've dipped your paws into the water, let me help you jump in."

Poppypool's legs felt like they were going to give out beneath her. Her throat tightened as she struggled to find her voice. "What do you want from me?" she whispered, finally meeting his gaze.

Rowantail's smile widened, his eyes glittering with triumph. "I want you to embrace what you are. I want you to stop pretending to be something you're not. You've already taken the first step. Now, all you need to do is keep going."

Poppypool's heart pounded, her mind spinning with conflicting emotions. She wanted to run, to wake up, to escape the suffocating presence of her father. But the darkness in his words resonated with something deep inside her. She had already crossed the line, and part of her feared that there was no coming back.

Rowantail leaned in close, his voice a dark, velvety whisper in her ear. "This is your destiny, Poppy. You can't deny it forever."

And just like that, the world around her began to fade, the trees dissolving into mist, Rowantail's form dissipating into the shadows. Poppypool gasped for breath as she woke with a start, her body trembling, her heart racing.

But his words lingered.

There's no turning back now.

Chapter 4

The sunlight filtering in the medicine den felt harsher today, as though even the warmth of the day couldn't chase away the chill Poppypool felt deep in her bones. That morning, she had woken in a cold sweat, Rowantail's voice still echoing in her mind, his dark promises swirling around her like a fog. She hadn't slept well, and her body ached with the weight of it all.

You've already crossed the line.

She pushed the thought away, forcing herself to focus on the task she'd zoned out in the middle of doing. She was sorting herbs- broom, goldenrod, horsetail- but her paws and movements felt sluggish, as if weighed down by something unseen. Her mind kept drifting back to the dream, to Rowantail's gleaming eyes and the certainty in his voice. She had killed once. She couldn't forget that.

"Poppypool?"

She jumped at the sound of Newtflake's voice, the suddenness of it pulling her from her thoughts. Her apprentice was standing in the entrance of their shared den, his dark gray-and-white pelt dappled with sunlight. His eyes were bright, but there was a hint of concern in them.

"I've gathered the yarrow you asked for," he said, setting down the bundle of herbs. "Are you alright? You seem...distant."

Poppypool blinked, trying to shake off the unease creeping up her spine. "I'm fine," she lied, her voice more clipped than she intended. "Just tired."

Newtflake's brow furrowed, but he didn't push the matter. Instead, he nodded and began to organize the herbs beside her. The silence between them was thick with unspoken tension. Poppypool's paws moved on pure instinct, though her mind was elsewhere and far away.

You know what it feels like to hold a cat's life in your paws.

Rowantail's words lingered, clawing at her thoughts. Every time she touched an herb, every time she tended to a wound, she couldn't help but wonder. Was she healing them...or deciding their fate? The power she held as a medicine cat suddenly felt darker, more dangerous.

Newtflake broke the silence again. "Stormfern wants to see you later. She mentioned something about checking Hawkflight's paw- it's still not healing right after that thorn got stuck the other day."

Poppypool's chest tightened at the mention of her brother. Hawkflight had always trusted her without question, but lately, even he seemed to notice the change in her. She saw it in the way he looked at her, the concern in his eyes whenever she spoke too quickly or turned away from his questions. Would he sense the darkness in her now?

"I'll check on him soon," she muttered, voice hollow.

Newtflake hesitated, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye. "Are you sure you don't want me to handle it? You've been working nonstop."

She almost said yes. The thought of seeing her brother, of looking him in the eye while knowing what she had done- what she was capable of- made her stomach churn. But the guilt of that one word, *weak,* clawed at her. She couldn't let anyone think she was losing control.

"No," she said, her voice sharper this time. "I'll handle it."

Newtflake dipped his head and left the den, his tail twitching with unspoken worries. As soon as he was gone, Poppypool collapsed back onto her haunches, her head hanging low. She felt like she was falling apart, her mind a mess of tangled thoughts and gnawing fears.

There's no turning back now.

What did that even mean? Rowantail had said it with such

certainty, but she didn't know what he wanted from her. She hadn't done anything since Darkeyes, hadn't poisoned anyone, hadn't acted on the dark whispers in her head. But was that enough?

Poppypool's breath quickened as doubt surged within her. She felt like she was walking along a cliffside, one wrong step from falling into the darkness completely. The pressure was suffocating, and no matter how hard she tried to shake it, her father's voice always returned.

The weight of it all pressed down on her, and for the first time in moons, she allowed herself to wonder if maybe- just maybe- Rowantail was right.

*****

Later that day, Poppypool found herself at Hawkflight's side. He was lying in a patch of sunlight near the warriors' den, licking at his injured paw. When he saw her approach, his face brightened, but his eyes still held that same concern she'd been avoiding.

"Poppy," he said, his voice filled with warmth, but also something more. "You came. I wasn't sure you would."

She forced a smile, kneeling beside him to examine his paw. "I told Newtflake I'd handle it," she explained, avoiding his gaze.

Hawkflight watched her closely as she worked, his voice soft. "You've been... different lately."

Her paws faltered for just a moment, but she didn't look up. "I've been busy. The Clan needs me."

"I know," Hawkflight said quietly. "But you've been distant. Even with me."

The words cut deeper than she expected. She had always been close to her brother, but lately, the weight of what she had done- and what she still might do- had created a distance between them. She couldn't let him in. Not anymore.

"I'm fine," she said, too quickly, too defensively.

Hawkflight didn't push her. He simply nodded, though the sadness in his eyes was clear. "Alright," he said softly. "But I'm here if you ever want to talk."

Poppypool finished treating his paw, her heart heavy. As she rose to leave, Hawkflight's voice stopped her.

"Poppy," he called gently. "Whatever's going on...just know I trust you. You're a good cat."

The guilt that surged through her was overwhelming. She wanted to tell him, to confess everything, but the words wouldn't come. She wasn't a good cat. Not anymore.

Without another word, Poppypool turned and walked away, her paws heavy, her mind swirling with doubt. Hawkflight's trust was like a thorn in her heart, piercing deeper with every step. She wasn't sure how much longer she could bear it.

*****

That night, as she lay in her nest, Poppypool stared up at the roof of the den, unable to sleep. Her father's words echoed in her mind again and again, the darkness creeping closer with every passing day.

You don't have to fight it anymore.

And for the first time, she wasn't sure she had the strength to resist.

Chapter 5

Poppypool paced in the darkness of her den, her heart racing in her chest. She had just woken from yet another nightmare- except this time, it wasn't just Rowantail's voice haunting her. He had given her a name. A cat. A target.

Stormfern.

Her paws felt like they were weighed down by stones as she moved to the herb store. She knew the consequences. If she didn't act, Rowantail would make her like unbearable. The Dark Forest's grip on her mind was growing stronger, and the guilt over Darkeyes' death- no, her *murder*- still clung to her like a shadow. But this...this was different. Stormfern was a good cat, a loyal deputy, and a symbol of strength for GlacierClan.

And now, she had to die.

Poppypool's eyes fell on the bundle of water hemlock, hidden beneath the safe herbs. Her breath caught in her throat as she reached for it, her paws trembling.

You've already crossed the line, Rowantail's voice echoed in her mind. *There's no turning back.*

Her heart pounded with the weight and severity of the decision. She had killed before, but this- this was blatant murder. She wasn't sure she could live with herself afterward.

But she didn't have a choice, did she?

*****

Days went by as Poppypool waited for the best time to take down the noble deputy. Rowantail's encouragement every night was eating her alive, but she had to do this. She didn't have a choice.

Then, the opportunity arose. A border scuffle between GlacierClan

and OakClan left Stormfern injured with large enough wounds to put the water hemlock in. She'd dressed and treated his injuries as normal to not draw suspicion onto herself. But now...now was her best shot at getting the job done.

Poppypool found Stormfern in the clearing, speaking quietly with Hawkflight and Sparrowstar. Her paws felt heavy as she approached, her heart racing. She knew she couldn't hesitate, couldn't show any sign of what was to come.

"Stormfern," she called softly, keeping her voice calm. "I need to check on your injuries."

The deputy looked up, her expression softening as she excused herself from the conversation. Her large frame looming over her as she approached, a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. "I'm fine, Poppypool. But if it'll ease your mind, I won't argue."

Her heart clenched as she spoke, her tone warm, trusting. The guilt of what she was about to do gnawing at her, but she forced herself to smile. "It won't take long," she assured the she-cat, leading her to a shaded spot nearby where she had her herbs ready.

Stormfern stretched out comfortably, laying her head on her paws. "You worry too much," she teased, closing her eyes for a moment. "I appreciate it, though."

Poppypool's throat tightened as she turned her back to her, her paws trembling as she crushed the water hemlock into the poultice. Her breath came in short, ragged gasps, her mind racing. Could she really do this? Was she about to take the life of one of the Clan's strongest warriors?

You have no choice.

She swallowed hard, turning back to Stormfern, who hadn't seemed to notice her internal struggle. Carefully, she undressed the previously treated injury and applied the poultice onto the wound, her paws steady despite the turmoil inside her. She worked quickly, efficiently, knowing that the poison would soon take effect.

"It might sting a little," she muttered, barely able to look her in the eye.

Stormfern nodded, not sensing the true danger she was in. "I've had worse."

The moment stretched on endlessly. Poppypool watched, her heart pounding in her hears, waiting for the inevitable. It wouldn't take long- the water hemlock was already seeping into her bloodstream. Her chest tightened as guilt clawed at her.

And then it began.

Stormfern's eyes snapped open as her body convulsed violently. She let out a sharp gasp, her paws scrabbling against the earth. Panic flooded her gaze as she looked to Poppypool, confusion and terror clear in her expression.

"P-Poppy-!" Her voice was cut off by a violent shudder.

She backed away, her heart hammering, tears welling in her eyes. *I did this.*

Stormfern collapsed onto her side, her limbs twitching uncontrollably. Her breathing came in shallow, ragged bursts as the seizures wracked her body. It was quick- mercifully quick- but every moment felt like an eternity to Poppypool.

When the convulsions finally stopped, Stormfern's body lay still, her eyes glassy, unseeing. She was gone.

Poppypool stood frozen, staring at the lifeless body of the deputy. Her breath came in short gasps as the reality of what she'd done crashed down on her. Stormfern was dead. And she had kill her.

There's no turning back.

Rowantail's voice echoed in her mind, this time louder than ever.

Poppypool stared for a moment longer at the deputy's body, before throwing her head back in a loud cry, one of both despair and grief.

As Clanmates rushed to her cry, confusion and grief rippled through them. Poppypool looked at them, trying to reign herself in to put on the trusted medicine cat act once more. Questions came flooding in, from Hawkflight, Sparrowstar, and others, demanding to know how this could have happened.

"What happened, Poppypool?" Hawkflight's voice trembled with grief and disbelief. "Stormfern was just just a moment ago!"

Poppypool drew in a deep breath, forcing her voice to remain steady. "She...she had been struggling with a low-grade infection for a while. I thought it was minor, something I could treat easily. But..." she paused, her voice faltering as her facade cracked. "I didn't realize how quickly it had turned serious."

"An infection?" Sparrowstar's eyes narrowed, her voice steady but filled with concern. "Why didn't you say anything?"

Poppypool lowered her gaze, unable to look the Clan, her brother, much less the *leader* in the eyes. "I didn't think it was life-threatening. I treated her regularly, and she seemed to be recovering well. Cats get infections all the time. But when I checked on her this morning, I noticed signs of a deeper illness. Something must've spread through her body faster than I or Newtflake could treat it."

"But she was so strong," Flamefrost interjected, his voice wavering with disbelief. "How could she just...die like that?"

Poppypool looked around at the gathered cats, guilt clawing at her chest. "It's rare, but there are some infections that lie dormant in a cat's body and then it suddenly flares up- but I don't know what it's called. I've heard about it before." Her voice softened, trying to ease the Clan and their minds. "Stormfern didn't show symptoms until it was too late. Her body couldn't fight it off in time and my herbs would've been useless."

Some cats looked skeptical, but most seemed to accept her explanation. But most wasn't the entire Clan and she needed them to believe her.

"She had a small injury that got infected, but I thought it was under control." She continued, hoping saying more would gain the acceptance of those who didn't believe her. "I used goldenrod and cobwebs to clean it. It healed, but infections like these sometimes spread deeper than we can see."

Flamefrost shared confused looks with those around him. "But...Stormfern never complained about feeling ill, did she?" The cats around him shook their heads. "Surely she would've said something to someone."

"She never complained about it to me or Newtflake, always insisting she felt fine whenever I asked." The reply came easy, but it felt like bile on her tongue to say it. "By the time I realized how bad it was, her body had already begun to shut down. Her collapse was a result from the fever overwhelming her body."

The Clan was quiet, say for the gentle sobbing of a few cats. Poppypool held her breath as she waited for another cat to question her story, but nothing came.

Then, Sparrowstar broke the silence. "Stormfern's sudden death is horrific and tragic," she said, her voice thick with grief for her friend. "GlacierClan must have a new deputy and I shall appoint one now. I say this before the body of Stormfern so her spirit may hear and approve my choice. Hickorytree will be the new deputy of GlacierClan!"

No cat said anything as the announcement was made, and Poppypool could feel the tension and grief hovering over the cats like a cloud. The air in the clearing was thick with grief as Sparrowstar's voice rang out. Her decision to appoint Hickorytree as deputy had been swift, but the Clan was too shaken to react. Stormfern was a beloved cat in the Clan, and Poppypool could feel the eyes of every cat burning into her pelt as she stood next to the former deputy's lifeless body.

I killed her.

The thought clawed at her, but she couldn't let it show. Not here, not now. She was a medicine cat- trusted, revered. No one could

suspect what she had done.

She bent over Stormfern's body, her paws moving mechanically as she prepared her for the coming vigil. Her fur brushed against her cold pelt, sending a shiver down her spine. She had tended to fallen Clanmates before, but never like this. Never knowing that she had been the cause.

Around her, the Clan was quiet, murmuring in small groups. Newtflake was organizing the vigil ceremony with a solemn efficiency, and Sparrowstar had returned to her den after the announcement of Hickorytree's promotion. The new deputy stood off to the side, looking uncomfortable with his new title, his gaze flickering to Stormfern's body every few heartbeats. Hawkflight watched from the edge of the crowd, his eyes filled with sorrow as he glanced at his sister.

Poppypool knew she didn't have much time.

*****

When the vigil began, Poppypool excused herself early, claiming that she needed to prepare more herbs for those who were injured. Her voice was steady, but inside, her heart raced. She had to get rid of the water hemlock- if Newtflake found it, her deception would be revealed.

She slipped back into the medicine den, her paws trembling as she made her way to the herb store. There it was, hidden behind a bundle of inconspicuous plants. The crushed remnants of water hemlock, the poison that ultimately killed Stormfern.

Her breath hitched as she grabbed it, her mind racing. She couldn't leave it here. She couldn't bury it too close to camp either- someone might find it. She'd have to go far, but she couldn't be seen sneaking away with the herbs.

Forcing herself to stay calm, she wrapped the remains of the poison tightly in herbs so she herself wouldn't suffer the same fate as Stormfern, before tucking it under a blanket of moss to conceal it away. She'd have to wait until everyone was asleep or until the

camp was quieter. If she was lucky, no cat would notice her absence from the vigil.

The night dragged on, and Poppypool stayed close to the medicine den, listening for the sounds of Clanmates shuffling during Stormfern's vigil. Each step felt heavier than the last, and every time someone glanced in her direction, she felt a rush of panic. Her mind raced with the image of Stormfern's final moments- the twitching, the sudden stillness- and the thought of what might happen if anyone discovered her secret.

But eventually, as the vigil stretched long into the night, the Clan began to settle. Newtflake was speaking at Stormfern's side, his voice soft and reverent, and the rest of the Clan had gathered to pay their respects. Now was her chance.

Poppypool slipped out of the den, the bundle of poison hidden in a pouch around her neck. She moved swiftly, keeping to the shadows as she padded silently out of camp. Her paws carried her far beyond the camp's boundaries, into a dense patch of long grass not far from the OakClan border. There, she dug quickly, her paws working frantically to get rid of the evidence.

Once the water hemlock was buried, Poppypool stood frozen for a moment, her breath coming in shallow gasps. She had covered her tracks. No one would find it now.

But the guilt...that was another story.

*****

When she returned to camp, Poppypool saw that the vigil had dwindled. Only a few cats remained near Stormfern's body, including Hawkflight and Sparrowstar. Her brother gave her a weary, but understanding nod as she approached. She knew she should stay at Stormfern's side until the vigil was over, but her paws felt heavy, her heart weighted by the truth she couldn't tell.

Instead, she sat quietly, a little way off from the others, pretending to pay her respects. Her mind was far away, her thoughts consumed by what she had done. Her father's voice echoed in her ears, cold

and relentless.

One death is just the beginning, Poppy.

As the Clan mourned, Poppypool kept her head down, hiding the turmoil beneath her facade of calm. She knew she couldn't hide forever, but for now, all she could do was wait.

Chapter 6

The camp was quiet, but Poppypool's mind was anything but peaceful. She tossed and turned in her nest, unable to shake the gnawing guilt that kept her awake. The memory of Stormfern's final moments haunted her every breath. Her dreams had been restless for days, filled with flashes of her body lying cold and still, and the weight of her father's voice echoing in her ears.

Tonight, however, she felt a familiar tug– a force pulling her deeper into her dreams, one she knew all too well.

No, not again.

But it was too late. The shadows thickened around her, and she found herself pulled once more into the oppressive darkness of the Dark Forest. The familiar twisted trees loomed overhead, their branches reaching out like claws. The air felt colder here, heavier, as though it was suffocating her.

And then, from the shadows, he appeared– Rowantail.

His yellow eyes gleamed with satisfaction as he stepped closer, his dark fur blending with the eerie landscape around him. "You've done well, Poppy," he purred, his voice smoothe and oily, like a snake's whisper. "Stormfern is dead, and GlacierClan is weaker for it."

Poppypool's stomach twisted at his words, bile rising in her throat. "I didn't want to do it," she spat, her voice trembling. "I only did it because you– because you made me."

Rowantail let out a low chuckle, his tail flicking with amusement. "Don't fool yourself. You had a choice, and you chose to act. It was you who mixed the poison. It was you who delivered the fatal dose. But don't worry, Poppy, you'll find that it gets easier with time."

His words sent a chill down her spine. "Easier?" she repeated, her

voice barely a whisper. "How could any of this ever be easy?"

Rowantail's expression darkened, and he took a step closer, towering over her. "Because you are my daughter," he growled, his voice taking a sharper edge. "And we do what must be done to ensure power. You are part of something much bigger than yourself, Poppypool. GlacierClan is weak, and with every death, it grows weaker. The strong will survive, and you– my *blood*– will be among them."

Poppypool shook her head, her breath coming in shallow gasps. "No... I can't keep doing this. I won't. I already crossed the line."

Rowantail's eyes narrowed, his voice turning cold and menacing. "You think you can stop now? Do you think *StarClan* will forgive you after what you've done? You're already tainted, Poppypool. There's no going back. The only way forward is with me."

The realization hit her like a blow. Rowantail was right– she had crossed a line, and there was no erasing what she had done. Her paws were stained with blood, and no amount of regret or guilt could wash that away. But the idea of continuing down this path, of taking more lives, filled her with dread.

"I never wanted this," she whispered, her voice trembling. "I just wanted to help my Clan, to be a good medicine cat."

Rowantail's gaze softened, but it wasn't out of pity– it was condescension. "You still can, my daughter. But you must learn to see the bigger picture. What is one life when it serves the greater good? GlacierClan will fall, and when it does, you will be safe. You will be on the side that wins."

Poppypool felt trapped, suffocated by the weight of his words and the pressure of her own guilt. She hated him, but there was a dark part of her that feared he was right. She had gone too far. There was no turning back to the life she once knew. But there was still a sliver of her that wanted to fight back, to resist.

"What do you want from me?" she asked, her voice barely a whisper.

Rowantail's eyes gleamed with satisfaction, as though this was the moment he had been waiting for. "I want you to finish what you started," he said simply. "There are still those in GlacierClan who stand in the way. Cats who would try to stop you, to protect Sparrowstar's reign. They must be dealt with."

"Who?" she asked, voice hollow.

Rowantail's smile widened, his teeth gleaming in the moonlight. "Otterfire."

The name struck her like blow to the chest. Otterfire– beloved elder and Sparrowstar's brother– served the Clan for seasons before Poppypool was born. He was kind, funny, and loyal to the Clan and his sister. She couldn't bear the thought of harming him.

"No," she said firmly, shaking her head. "I won't do it. Not him."

Rowantail's smile faded, replaced by a cold, dangerous glare. "You don't have a choice, Poppypool. Defy me, and I'll send a message to the Clan exposing you. I will ensure that every cat in GlacierClan knows the truth– that you're a murderer, that Stormfern and Darkeyes' blood runs at your paws. How long do you think they'll let you live after that?"

Poppypool's breath caught in her throat. The threat was clear, and she knew Rowantail was capable of following through. If he revealed her secret, her life in GlacierClan would be over. She would lose everything– her position, her family, her Clan, her future.

Tears welled in her eyes, but she blinked them away, refusing to let Rowantail see her weakness. "You're a monster," she whispered, her voice trembling with anger.

Rowantail leaned in closer, his breath cold against her fur. "And so are you, Poppy. You just don't know it yet. We are the same."

*****

The sun was just beginning to set, casting long shadows across the camp as the last rays of light filtered through the trees. The camp

was alive with the usual evening chatter, warriors returning from patrols, the new apprentices eager to share their day's accomplishments, and elders settling into their nests for the night. It was a scene of normalcy that made Poppypool's heart ache.

She padded quietly across the clearing, her paws heavy with the weight of her secret. For a moment, she let herself pretend that everything was the way it had been before– before Rowantail, before the poison, before Stormfern's death. But that illusion crumbled as soon as she caught sight of Otterfire, the old tom stretched out peacefully near the elder's den, his tail twitching as he dozed in the fading sunlight.

He trusts me, she thought bitterly. *They all trust me.*

She tore her gaze away and headed for the medicine den, hoping to distract herself by organizing her herbs. It was something she could control– something that gave her a sense of calm amidst the storm raging inside her. The cool, earthly scent of the den washed over her as she entered, and for a moment, she allowed herself to take a deep breath and find comfort in the familiar surroundings.

Newtflake was already there, carefully sorting through a pile of herbs. He looked up when he saw her, his eyes bright with enthusiasm. "I was just about to check on Otterfire's leg," he said, flicking his tail toward a small bundle of herbs. "Staying up during Stormfern's vigil seems to have aggravated his bones."

Poppypool forced a smile, though her heart wasn't in it. "Good work," she said softly. "Make sure you wrap it well. We don't want him putting too much pressure and weight on it."

Newtflake nodded, his eyes shining with pride at her praise. "I will. I've learned a lot from you, Poppypool. Will you be going to the half-moon meeting tonight?"

The words hit her like a stone to the chest. He was learning from her– learning from a cat who had betrayed everything she stood for, twice. But she couldn't let him see her turmoil. She had to keep up appearances, at least for now.

"That's good, I'm glad." she murmured, turning to her pile of herbs to sort through. "I'll be attending tonight– yes. Tell Otterfire I said hello when you see him." Her paws moved automatically as she sorted through the pile, but her mind was elsewhere, tangled in a web of guilt and fear. She couldn't escape the thoughts of Rowantail and what he had asked her to do. The deadline was looming, and she didn't know how much longer she could keep up the facade.

As she worked, she heard the footfalls of paws outside the den. Poppypool glanced up to see Hawkflight entering the den, his expression a mix of concern and determination. He ducked his head as he approached, his gaze softening when it met hers.

"Poppy," he said quietly, "I wanted to check on you."

She swallowed, her throat tight. "I'm fine, Hawkflight. Just...busy."

Hawkflight frowned, not convinced. He stepped closer, his tail brushing the ground as he sat beside her. "You don't have to pretend with me. I know things have been hard lately. Stormfern's death...it's been tough on all of us."

Poppypool flinched at the mention of Stormfern, her guilt flaring up like a thorn digging into her heart. She kept her gaze fixed on the herbs in front of her, unable to meet her brother's eyes. "I'm handling it," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Hawkflight sighed, his tail flicking in frustration. "You don't have to handle it alone, you know. I'm here. We all are."

Poppypool's paws stilled for a moment, and she felt the weight of her secret pressing down on her. Hawkflight didn't know how deep her struggle went– he couldn't know. But his words offered a small, fleeting comfort, even if they were based on a lie.

"I appreciate it," she said, her voice tight. "But I'll be okay."

Before Hawkflight could press further, the sound of Sparrowstar's voice rang out from the center of the camp. The two siblings moved to the den entrance, seeing the leader standing on the Highbranch, her gaze sweeping over the gathered cats.

"Warriors of GlacierClan," Sparrowstar began, her voice calm but authoritative. "We've recieved news that rogues have been spotted near the border. I'll need volunteers for a patrol at first light to assess the situation and ensure our territory remains secure."

There was a murmur of agreement from the warriors, and several cats, including Hickorytree and Hawkflight, stepped forward to offer their services. Poppypool felt a strange sense of relief wash over her– something to focus on that wasn't her own internal battle.

Hawkflight glanced at her one last time before joining the others in the clearing. "I'll see you later," he promised, his voice soft.

Poppypool nodded, watching him go with a mixture of gratitude and sadness. She wished she could tell him the truth– let him know just how much she needed his help. But that wasn't possible. Not now, not ever.

As the camp began to settle down for the night, Poppypool returned to her herbs, trying to find some semblance of peace in the repetitive motions of her work. But no matter how hard she tried to push it away, the thought of confronting StarClan that night made her feel ill.

She wasn't sure how long she could keep it up– the act, the lies, the guilt. But for tonight, all she could do was wait for what StarClan had in store for her.

Chapter 7

The moon was high, casting a silvery light over the forest as Poppypool led Newtflake toward the Moonpool. The crisp night air seemed to cling to her pelt, though it wasn't cold enough to warrant the shiver that ran down her spine. It was the first time she and Newtflake had attended a half-moon meeting together since Darkeyes' death. As she padded beside her apprentice, Poppypool couldn't help but feel an overwhelming sense of dread, though she worked to keep her expression neutral.

"What do you think StarClan will say tonight?" Newtflake asked quietly, his eyes wide with excitement. "Maybe they'll give us some guidance on the prey shortage or the border skirmish with OakClan."

Poppypool forced a smile. "Perhaps," she mused, her voice softer than usual. *Prey shortage?* There wasn't a shortage, was there? She hadn't noticed...though she hadn't exactly been herself for the last few moons.

In truth, she wasn't looking forward to speaking with StarClan. She'd backed out of the last meetings due to being scared of StarClan's reaction. Would she see Darkeyes or Stormfern? What would they say to her?

The path to the Moonpool was familiar beneath her paws, but tonight, each step felt heavier. As the neared the sacred cave, the scents of the other medicine cats and an unfmailair scent reached her nose. Poppypool spotted Splashnose, Sunnyshine, and Orchidfern of DawnClan sitting next to the shimmering pool. Poolripple of NightClan stood with a black she-cat with purple eyes, seemingly explaining the nature of the meetings to her. Lilyrose and Blackberrythorn of OakClan noticed them as they approached, their heads turning and eyes glowing in the moonlight.

"Poppypool, Newtflake!" Lilyrose greeted them with a flick of her tail while Blackberrythorn ran toward them. "How is life in

GlacierClan?"

"GlacierClan has lost St-Stormfern, and there's a group of rogues causing problems." She mewed, her voice faltering at the mention of the former deputy, though she quickly steadied herself. "Fawnstripe's kits are apprentices, and Spiritsight has moved into

the nursery."

Splashnose's eyes flickered with sympathy as Poppypool relayed the news. "I'm so sorry for your loss, Poppypool. Stormfern was a wonderful and respected deputy. I hope her spirit rests well in StarClan." The other medicine cats murmured their agreement, looking somber.

"How are the rest of the Clans?" Newtflake queried, his eyes shinning as he made eye contact with Orchidfern.

Poolripple was the first to share his news. "Larkpaw and her littermates all became apprentices early this moon," he said proudly, puffing out his chest. "While they all fussed about hunting and fighting, I could barely keep Larkpaw out of my den as a kit!" He purred with amusement, embarrassing his new apprentice as she ducked her head shyly. "I couldn't be more proud with the knowledge she's gained already."

"Congratulations, Larkpaw." Poppypool looked at the young she-cat fondly. The small she-cat gazed up at her, eyes shining. Though, her lack of response was a little odd.

Sunnyshine raised her head, her eyes shining with pride. "Our kits have also become apprentices, as well as Lizardberry's kits and Sootpaw becoming an apprentice as well." She and Splashnose purred, pressing their heads together as they celebrated their kits' promotion.

"I'm glad your Clans have had so much good news," purred Lilyrose as she smiled at her comrades. "OakClan has a ton of new apprentices, and we're looking forward to having more paws to help with camp duties." She looked out at the night sky and cleared her throat. "Shall we begin?"

Poppypool nodded and picked a spot next to Poolripple and Larkpaw to settle down. Newtflake chose to lay next to Orchidfern, murmuring to her while she flushed and leaned against him with a purr. She smiled, assuming the two had just confessed their feelings and become mates before her very eyes. *I wish them well.* Orchidfern's mentors also noticed the two cats' close proximity and gave each other a knowing look before settling down and lapping at the water.

Poppypool looked down at the water, the dancing stars in the reflection bouncing off the stone walls and ceiling. She drew in a deep breath and lapped at the surface nervously, closing her eyes as she waited for sleep to take her, hoping- praying- that StarClan would offer her some semblance of peace.

The familiar sensation of dream-sleep took hold, and Poppypool felt her body relax into the darkness. But instead of the starry fields of StarClan or the soft glow of their pelts surrounding her, she was greeted with...nothing. Only blackness stretched out around her, a suffocating void that chilled her to the bone.

She stood in the emptiness, her heart pounding in her ears. "StarClan?" she called out, her voice wavering. "Please, I need you."

No response.

Her breath quickened, panic rising in her throat. She hadn't felt this alone in the dream world before. Even in the Dark Forest, Rowantail's presence was palpable, his malevolent energy always lurking nearby. But here, there was...nothing.

Suddenly, a flicker of light appeared far ahead of her, a single star-like glow in the distance. Poppypool's breath caught in her throat. She stumbled forward, paws dragging through the emptiness toward the light. As she drew closer, the light took shape, materializing into the form of a cat. But it wasn't any cat she recognized.

The figure was hazy, their pelt dull and their eyes filled with sorrow. Poppypool stopped a few tail-lengths away, her fur prickling with unease.

"Who are you?" she asked, her voice barely more than a whisper.

The spirit's eyes locked onto hers, and their expression hardened. "I am one who has walked the path of the stars, but I am not here for pleasantries, Poppypool."

Poppypool's heart sank. There was no warmth, no compassion in the spirit's tone. Only cold, distant judgment.

"Where is StarClan?" she asked, her voice trembling. "Why won't they speak to me?"

The spirit narrowed their eyes. "StarClan has turned away from you. Your heart is tainted, Poppypool. Your paws are stained with blood."

Poppypool flinched, feeling as though the ground beneath her paws had fallen away. "No," she whispered, shaking her head. "I didn't...I didn't want to...Rowantail, he-"

The spirit cut her off. "It does not matter why. The choices you have made, the lives you have taken, have darkened your path. StarClan will not commune with you while you continue to walk this path of death."

Poppypool's eyes filled with tears. "Please...I need your help. I don't know how to stop. He's controlling me, manipulating me."

The spirit's gaze softened, but only slightly. "StarClan cannot help you if you continue to obey the Dark Forest. You must make things right, Poppypool. Only then will the stars shine for you again."

"How?" Poppypool pleaded, desperation clawing at her throat. "How can I fix what I've done?"

The spirit remained silent for a long moment before speaking again. "That is for you to discover. But if you do not act soon, you will be lost to us forever."

With that, the spirit began to fade, their form dissolving back into the darkness. Poppypool reached out, her heart racing. "Wait! Please, don't leave me!"

But it was too late. The light disappeared, and Poppypool was left alone in the void once more, the weight of the spirit's words crushing her chest.

When Poppypool woke, her body was trembling. The other medicine cats were stirring around her, talking about their peaceful visits to StarClan. Newtflake hurried toward her, his eyes bright.

"StarClan spoke to me!" he exclaimed. "They said our Clan will survive the hardships to come."

Beside her, Poolripple sat up and looked at the two of them. "StarClan has accepted Larkpaw as my apprentice," he purred, flicking his tail around the black she-cat as she groggily woke up.

Poppypool's heart ached at the two toms and their joy, but she forced a smile. "That's wonderful news."

But inside, her soul was in turmoil. StarClan had refused to speak to her, and now she knew why. *Even though I already knew.* Her paws were stained with the blood of her Clanmates, and unless she found a way to make things right, the stars would never shine for her again.

As the medicine cats gathered to leave at the first light, Poppypool trailed behind, her thoughts dark and heavy. The path ahead was uncertain, and the weight of her sins pressed down harder with each step she took away from the Moonpool.

Chapter 8

The familiar shadows of the Dark Forest pressed in around Poppypool, the air heavy with the scent of damp earth, decay, and blood. She had been expecting Rowantail, but this time there was no mistaking the unbridled fury in the atmosphere as he appeared, his yellow eyes blazing with rage.

"You failed me, Poppypool," Rowantail spat, his voice a venomous hiss that sent shivers down her spine. His teeth glinting in the small amount of light as he approached her. "I gave you an order, and you ignored it. You're a coward!"

Poppypool stood her ground, heart pounding, but she lifted her chin. "I won't kill for you anymore," she said, her voice shaking but firm. "I've hurt too many already. Otterfire...he's done nothing to deserve death. *Stormfern* didn't deserve death. You won't control me any longer, Rowantail."

Rowantail's lips curled into a snarl. "You think you have a choice? I made you what you are, and you'll obey me until your last breath."

"I'm not your puppet anymore," she snapped, her tail lashing behind her. "I'm done with this. With *you*."

Rowantail's eyes darkened, and before she could react, he lunged. His claws raked down her side, tearing through her fur with a sickening force. Poppypool cried out, stumbling back as blood welled from the deep gashes. Pain shot through her, but she stood tall, refusing to show weakness, even as her body throbbed from the attack and her legs trembled.

"You'll regret this," Rowantail growled, his breath hot against her face. "You're nothing without me."

Poppypool's vision blurred, but she didn't back down. "I became a medicine cat without you, and I'd rather be nothing than have *you*."

With a final furious snarl, Rowantail swiped at her again, slashing across her shoulder. The impact sent her tumbled back into darkness, and as her world crumbled around her, the sharp agony followed her into the real world.

*****

Poppypool jerked awake in her nest, her breathing ragged as her body throbbed with pain. The gashes from the Dark Forest encounter remained, fresh and real. Blood matted her fur, staining her nest red, and her sides heaved as she tried to sit up. She could feel her injuries burning, each breath making her wince.

"Poppypool?" Newtflake's voice was groggy but filled with alarm as he rushed to her side. His eyes widened with horror as he saw the blood staining her pelt. "What happened? You're hurt!"

"I'm...fine." Poppypool gasped, though the pain in her voice was undeniable. She tried to shake off the daze, but her body wouldn't cooperate. "I just-"

"Don't move," Newtflake interrupted, his voice trembling with concern. "You're not fine. Let me help you."

Poppypool couldn't resist as Newtflake quickly gathered herbs, his paws moving with speed and precision. He began applying poultices to her wounds, the familiar scent of goldenrod and cobwebs filling the den. His touch was gentle, but the pressure on her wounds made her wince.

"What happened?" Newtflake asked as he worked, his voice low and filled with worry. "I've never seen wounds like this. Was it another cat?"

Poppypool hesitated, unsure of how much to tell him. She couldn't reveal everything about Rowantail- not yet. "It was... a dream," she said quietly. "But it felt so real."

Newtflake paused for a moment, concern flickering in his eyes, but he didn't press further. Instead, he focused on her injuries, carefully patching up each wound.

Once he was done, he sat back with a heavy sigh. "You need to rest, Poppypool. These wounds are serious."

"I will," she murmured, though her thoughts were still racing from the encounter with Rowantail. As much as she wanted to, she couldn't rest- not while her despicable father was out there, waiting to strike again.

Newtflake glanced at her, his expression softening slightly. "You've been under a lot of stress lately. Maybe...maybe it's time for something more normal. You know, to take your mind off things."

Poppypool managed a weak smile, despite the pain. "Like what?"

Newtflake's ears twitched, and he looked away, almost sheepishly. "Well...Orchidfern and I talked during the half-moon meeting," he said, his voice quiet. "We...we became mates."

Poppypool smiled genuinely for the first time since this entire thing happened, warmth blooming in her chest. "That's wonderful, Newtflake. You two are a great pair." She already knew, but she was touched that he opened up about it so soon after it happened.

Newtflake's whiskers twitched with embarrassment, but there was a sparkle in his eyes. "Thanks," he murmured. "But...we're not thinking about kits. Not yet, at least."

Poppypool chuckled softly, though it sent a sharp pain through her side. "Good," she teased. "Let's keep your focus on learning a bit more about herbs first, before you start thinking about fatherhood."

Newtflake let out a light laugh, but concern still lingered in his eyes as he glanced at her injuries. "Are you sure you'll be okay?"

"I'm sure," she reassured him, her voice gentle. "I just...need some time to heal."

Newtflake gave a hesitant nod, but Poppypool could see the worry etched on his face. She knew he wouldn't pry further, but his silent support was something she could always count on.

As Newtflake returned to his nest, Poppypool curled up once more,

the pain of her wounds dulling but the weight of Rowantail's threat still heavy in her mind. She had taken the first step- she had refused to kill Otterfire, but now she had to face the consequences.

*****

Poppypool's injuries burned with every move she made. Even something as small as adjusting her posture sent a bolt of pain through her body, causing her to grimace. Despite her injuries, Poppypool exited the den and stepped out into the camp. The stares from her Clanmates burned into her pelt, almost as hot as the pain that shot through her. Since waking up from her encounter a few nights ago, her Clanmates had questions about her injuries, as she expected. Thankfully, Newtflake aided in dampening the blaze of questions by giving some half-hearted excuse.

Poppypool headed for the prey-pile. Crouchmist and Maplewood were also at the pile, nosing through the small selection of prey until she approached. Their eyes flashed with alarm as they saw her injuries, then suspicion set in soon after. Maplewood hastily grabbed a starling and scampered away, Crouchmist following close behind.

She blinked, confused and hurt that the two young warriors blatantly avoided her. Swallowing down the hurt that rose in her chest and quickly picked up two small mice and walked away. Whispered conversations hushed as she walked by, and eyes burned into her pelt as she passed. Poppypool tried to meet the eyes of a few cats, though they avoided her gaze.

The sudden injuries laced across her pelt certainly didn't help with her trying to keep her secret. Even though she tried to explain them away- claiming she'd run into a rogue while collecting herbs at night- no one seemed to believe her. Suspicion clung to the air, thicker than the fog that hovered over the moor in leaf-fall.

Newtflake had already asked her twice since waking up that day if she needed needed help, his eyes full of concern, but Poppypool waved him off. She wasn't about to burden her apprentice with the truth, not when she barely knew how to deal with it herself. But weight was becoming too much.

*****

Poppypool padded softly into the nursery, her paws barely making a sound against the soft earth floor. Inside, the air was warm and welcoming, the faint musk of dried moss filled the atmosphere. The dim light filtered through the entrance, the shadows of the den seeming comforting.

At the far corner, Spiritsight was curled into a tight ball. Her once-bright indigo eyes she got from her mother were dull, clouded with exhaustion and grief. She hadn't moved much since Darkeyes' death, and Poppypool could see the toll it had taken on her. Her normally sleek, midnight-black fur was disheveled, her whiskers drooping with weariness.

"Spiritsight," Poppypool called gently as she approached, sitting beside her. "How are you feeling?"

The queen stirred slightly but didn't lift her head to meet Poppypool's gaze. "Tired," she murmured, her voice flat and distant. "So tired."

Poppypool's heart ached at the sight of the queen so broken. She pressed her nose briefly to Spiritsight's flank, offering silent comfort before gently examining her. Spiritsight's belly was round and heavy with the promise of kits.

Poppypool rested her paw lightly on Spiritsight's side, feeling the faintest ripple of movement beneath the queen's fur. Her own exhaustion and guilt were momentarily forgotten, replaced by a flicker of hope for the new life stirring within.

"You're expecting a litter of four," the medicine cat said softly, her tone warm despite her inner turmoil. "They feel healthy and strong."

Spiritsight's ear twitched, but she said nothing. For a few heartbeats, the only sound in the den was the soft breathing of the queen and the distant murmur of the camp outside.

But then, Spiritsight shifted, her voice low and strained. "Darkeyes will never meet them."

The words cut through the air, heavy with the weight of her grief. Spiritsight's eyes flicked toward Poppypool, filled with a raw sorrow that made the healer's chest tighten. The usual joy that came with the news of a healthy litter was swallowed by the void Darkeyes' absence had left.

Poppypool's throat tightened, and for a moment, she was at a loss for what to say. She could feel the shadow of her own guilt pressing down on her again. Darkeyes...Stormfern...the lives she could never bring back. Her paws were stained, and now, standing before Spiritsight, it felt all the more real.

"I'm so sorry, Spiritsight..." Poppypool whispered, her voice faltering. "I know how much she meant to you."

Spiritsight's body trembled slightly, but she held herself together, her eyes squeezing shut against the rising tide of emotion. "It's like...I can still feel her. Her warmth beside me, the sound of her voice on the wind...but she's gone. And she'll never meet the grandkits she wanted so desperately."

Poppypool lowered her head, her tail brushing softly against Spiritsight's flank. "You won't be alone. Hickorytree and the Clan will be here for you- and I'll be here."

Spiritsight didn't respond at first, her breathing shaky. Then she gave a small, bitter laugh, her eyes opening to reveal the glimmer of tears. "Will you?" She turned her gaze on Poppypool, her expression suddenly sharp with suspicion. "You're not the same, Poppypool. Every cat can see it. You're...distant. Cold."

Poppypool stiffened, guilt once again gnawing at her insides. She hadn't realized just how much her Clanmates had noticed her change, her struggle to balance the darkness that followed her every step. Spiritsight's words struck harder than expected, forcing her to swallow back the rising panic. "I-"

Spiritsight shook her head, her voice softening. "I don't mean to push, I'm sorry. I know you're trying, but...please don't disappear on us. We can't lose anyone else."

Poppypool could only nod, guilt choking the words she wanted to say.

****

That night, Poppypool found herself once again in the twisted, barren landscape of the Dark Forest. The heavy air pressed against her chest, and the familiar tang of rot filled her nose. She didn't want to be here, didn't want to see *him*, but no matter how much she resisted, the Dark Forest always found a way to pull her back.

As she moved through the undergrowth, shadows shifted around her. She froze when a whisper cut through the silence.

"Poppypool..."

She spun around, her breath catching in her throat. There, in the dark, she saw a familiar face- *Darkeyes.* Her cold eyes glowed with an eerie light, and her voice dripped with accusation. "Why did you do it, Poppypool? You were supposed to heal me."

"I...you were far too gone-" Poppypool tried to explain, but the thick fog seemed to choke her. Before she could continue, another voice joined in, this one laced with fury.

Stormfern. Her form was towering and dark, her voice a hiss of pure rage. "I trusted you. How could you betray me?"

Poppypool stepped back, her heart racing. "I didn't...I didn't want this..." Her voice trembled, but the two spirits circled her, their whispers growing louder, suffocating her with guilt.

From the shadows, Rowantail emerged, his eyes gleaming with cruel satisfaction. "You think you can escape me?" His voice was soft but venomous, curling around her like a snake. "You're mine, Poppypool. You'll *always* be mine."

Poppypool shivered, backing away from the spirits and her father's imposing figure. "I'm not going to kill for you anymore. You can't make me."

Rowantail's snarl cut through the air. "You'll regret everything,

Poppypool. You can't outrun the choices you've made. And soon, they'll destroy you."

Poppypool woke with a start, her body aching from the weight of the dream. Her sides burned where Rowantail had clawed her, and exhaustion settled deep in her bones. She was barely able to rise before Newtflake stirred in his nest, his eyes flashing in the gloom.

"You look terrible," he said, not bothering to hide his worry as he stepped out of his nest and approached hers. "You can't keep doing this to yourself, Poppypool. You're not alone, you know that, right?"

Poppypool managed a weak smile, but the weariness in her eyes betrayed her. "I'm fine," she murmured, though her voice lacked conviction. "Just tired."

Newtflake frowned, stepping closer. "You're not fine. You don't have to go through this alone."

For a moment, Poppypool considered confiding in him- telling him everything about Rowantail, about the Dark Forest. But the thought of dragging Newtflake into the nightmare was unbearable. She couldn't do that to him.

"I'll be alright," she said softly, turning away from his concerned gaze. "I just need some rest."

Newtflake hesitated but didn't push further. He gave a small nod and left her alone, his worry still clear in his eyes.

Chapter 9

Poppypool sat at the edge of camp, her gaze distant as she watched the sun begin its slow descent below the horizon. The golden light bathed the camp in a warm glow, but it did nothing to ease the chill that had settled in her chest. Her thoughts were miles away, tangled with guilt, fear, and the overwhelming weight of her secret.

Footsteps sounded softly behind her, but she didn't turn around. She knew who it was before he even spoke.

"Poppy," Hawkflight's voice was low but firm, carrying a mix of concern and frustration. "We need to talk."

Poppypool sighed, her shoulders tensing. She'd been avoiding this conversation for as long as she could, but her brother had always been perceptive- too perceptive for her liking. She glanced at him from the corner of her eye, seeing the tension in his stance, the way his ears twitched with unease.

"I'm fine, Hawkflight," she said, her voice flat and tired, hoping the lie would be enough to end it.

But Hawkflight wasn't so easily deterred this time. He padded closer, his yellow eyes narrowing as he sat beside her. "No, you're not. You've been so distant, Poppy. You look like you haven't slept in days, and those injuries..." His gaze flicked to the scratches and bruises still healing on her body. "You think I didn't notice? I'm not blind."

Poppypool clenched her jaw, her heart beating faster. She could feel the weight of his stare, his worry, but she couldn't tell him the truth. Not about Rowantail. Not about the Dark Forest. It would break him.

"I'm just tired," she muttered, keeping her gaze fixed on the horizon. "I've been busy with the herbs, Spiritsight...it's nothing."

Hawkflight's tail lashed in frustration. "Don't lie to me, Poppy. I know you better than that. You're hiding something, and it's tearing you apart. Why won't you let me help you?"

Poppypool's throat tightened, her heart aching at the desperation in his voice. She wanted to confide in him, to pour out everything that had been weighing on her, but the words refused to come. What could she possibly say? That she was responsible for Darkeyes' death? That she killed Stormfern? That she considered killing Otterfire? All because their father manipulated and used her?

"I'm not hiding anything," she said quietly, though the tremor in her voice betrayed her. "You're just imagining things."

Hawkflight let out a sharp breath, his frustration mounting. He stood up, pacing in front of her as if he couldn't contain his emotions any longer. "I'm not imagining anything, Poppy! You've changed, everyone can see it. You're not yourself anymore."

Poppypool looked away, guilt clawing at her insides. She could feel the tears threatening to spill over, but she forced them back, refusing to let him see how broken she felt. "I'm fine," she whispered again, but it sounded hollow even to her own ears.

Hawkflight stopped pacing and turned to face her, his eyes blazing with a mix of hurt and anger. "Do you really think I'm that blind? That I don't know when something's wrong with my own sister?" His voice softened, though the pain lingered. "I'm worried about you, Poppy. I miss the way things used to be."

Poppypool felt her heart constrict, a sharp pain of regret cutting through her. She had pushed him away, along with everyone else, and now her actions were unraveling the bond they'd once shared. But how could she possibly explain the darkness she'd fallen into?

"I miss it too," she whispered, her voice barely audible. She couldn't meet his gaze, her eyes fixed on the ground.

For a long moment, Hawkflight was silent, his frustration ebbing away into something softer- something sadder. He sat beside her again, his tail brushing lightly against hers. "Then let me in, Poppy,"

he said, his voice much gentler now. "You don't have to carry whatever *this* is alone."

Poppypool swallowed hard, her throat burning with the effort to keep her emotions in check. She longed to tell him, to let the truth spill out and unburden herself, but fear held her back. Fear of what he'd think. Fear of what he'd think.

"I can't," she finally whispered, the words slipping out before she could stop them.

Hawkflight's ears twitched, confusion flickering in his eyes. "Why not?"

Poppypool shook her head, her voice trembling. "It's...complicated."

Hawkflight sighed, the weight of her words settling heavily between them. "You know I'd never judge you, right? Whatever it is, we'll face it together."

For a brief moment, Poppypool was tempted- so tempted- to believe him. To trust that her brother could handle the truth, that he could stand by her even after everything she'd done. But the fear of losing him was stronger than any desire to confess.

"I know," she murmured, her voice barely more than a breath. "But...not right now."

Hawkflight's expression softened, though his eyes still held the glimmer of worry. "Alright," he said quietly, though it was clear he wasn't satisfied. "But when you're ready, I'll be here."

Poppypool nodded, her heart heavy with the weight of everything left unsaid. Hawkflight pressed his nose to her forehead, a brief touch of comfort as he rose to leave.

"Just promise me one thing, Poppy," he said, pausing at the edge of the clearing. "Don't let this thing, whatever it is, destroy you."

Poppypool closed her eyes, the tears she'd been holding back finally spilling over as she whispered, "I'll try."

*****

The moon hung high in the sky, casting a pale silver light over the sleeping camp. The gentle rise and fall of Newtflake's breathing filled the den, a steady rhythm that echoed in the stillness. His tail was curled neatly over his nose, his body nestled in the soft moss and heather that dappled his nest.

But Poppypool lay wide awake.

Her mind was a whirlwind of guilt, fear, and confusion, a tangle of emotions she couldn't untangle no matter how hard she tried. The warmth and security of the den did nothing to soothe the cold knot in her chest, and every time she closed her eyes, she could see them- Stormfern's lifeless body, Darkeyes' empty gaze, and the shadow of her father's looming presence. Rowantail's voice echoed in her head, a poisonous whisper that lingered even in her waking hours.

She turned over, careful not to alert Newtflake. His peaceful expression only deepened the ache inside her, but she smiled softly. She was proud of the healer and cat he'd grown to be.

Poppypool's thoughts were racing, swirling like a storm in her head. Her eyes flicked to the sky, visible through a small gap in the den's roof. The stars shimmered, distant and cold. StarClan had been silent since her betrayal. She had begged for their guidance, but they had turned away from her, leaving her to stumble alone in the dark.

But tonight, she needed to try again. She needed to reach out- to beg for their forgiveness, their guidance, anything that would set her back on the right path.

Quietly, she rose from her nest, her paws barely making a sound as she stepped into the cool night air. The camp was still, the only movement was the gentle sway of the long grass in the light breeze. She padded toward the clearing, her heart heavy with the weight of everything she had done. The guilt gnawed at her, an ever-present shadow that never left her side.

Her eyes lifted to the sky again, her heart pounding with desperation as she sent a silent plea to the stars. "StarClan, please," she whispered, her voice trembling. "Tell me what to do. Tell me how to make things right."

At first, there was only silence. The wind rustled the grass, and the moonlight bathed the camp in an ethereal glow. Poppypool closed her eyes, her body trembling with the weight of her desperation.

And then, there it was- a faint shimmer just in front of her, growing brighter with each passing moment. A shape began to form, as though descending from the stars. The figure was familiar- the same spirit that had met her at the half-moon meeting. A cat with light gray fur, white paws, tail tip, snout, and light yellow eyes that were unreadable. Faint yellow patches dappled their pelt as stars danced in their fur.

Poppypool's heart pounded in her chest as she stepped forward, her voice breaking. "Please, tell me what to do. I don't know how to make things right. I-I'm lost."

The spirit tilted their head, their eyes gentle yet distant. "You seek forgiveness, but the path you walk is not an easy one, Poppypool. The stars cannot speak to while your heart is clouded by guilt."

"But how can I fix it?" Poppypool's voice was strained, tears welling in her eyes. "How do I fix what I've done? How do I-"

The spirit raised a paw, silencing her. "I, too, once sought power." Their voice softened, a quiet sadness in their tone. "I, too, was tempted by the thought of greatness- of being more than I was. I thought I could seize control, that I could lead my Clan into something greater. But the stars saw my heart, and they showed me the truth."

Poppypool blinked, her tears still threatening to spill over. "What happened?"

The spirit's gaze darkened, though their voice remained calm. "I led my Clan down a dangerous path, driven by ambition. I thought it was for their sake, but in truth, it was for mine. I nearly lost

everything I had- the ones I loved, the future I dreamed of. But in the end, I chose to walk away from the temptation. I gave up what I thought I wanted in order to protect my Clan. That is why the stars allowed me to join them. I made things right by choosing loyalty over ambition."

Poppypool swallowed hard, the weight of the spirit's words sinking deep into her bones. "I want to make things right, but... how can I undo what I've done? How can I stop this when it feels like I've already gone too far?"

The spirit stepped closer, their eyes softening with empathy. "You must choose, Poppypool. Power and ambition may tempt you, but they will never fill the void inside you. Only loyalty, only love, will set you free. You must choose between the darkness of your past and the light of your future."

Poppypool's breath hitched, her throat tight. "But what if I fail?"

The spirit's gaze lingered on her for a moment, their voice gentle yet firm. "Failure is not in the falling, Poppypool. It is in refusing to rise again. You still have the chance to stand. To fight for your Clan. But the choice is yours."

With that, the spirit began to fade, their form dissolving into the night like mist. Poppypool stared after them, her heart heavy yet...lighter than before. The choice was hers.

The stars, for now, remained distant and cold. But perhaps, one day, they would shine for her again.

Chapter 10

The air in the nursery was thick with tension, each breath drawn tight and nervous. Poppypool knelt beside Spiritsight, her paws gentle as she adjusted the queen's bedding. The birthing process had already begun, and the young queen's sides heaved with the effort of bringing her kits into the world. Outside, the camp clearing buzzed with life, but inside the nursery, there was nothing but the sound of Spiritsight's strained breaths.

"Breathe, Spiritsight. You're doing well. Just a little longer," Poppypool murmured, her voice steady, though she could feel the pressure mounting in her chest. Her heart ached for the exhausted queen, whose eyes were squeezed shut, ears flattened against her head as another wave of pain rippled through her.

Newtflake hovered nearby, eyes wide but determined. He brought over a wad of soaked moss, gently pressing it against Spiritsight's draw maw. "You're doing great, Spiritsight. You're almost there," he encouraged, his tail tip twitching with nervous energy. He glanced at Poppypool, worry clouding his gaze.

Poppypool nodded back at him, her own uncertainty buried deep beneath a layer of calm professional. "Keep the moss ready. The first kit is almost here."

Spiritsight let out a low, agonized moan, her body trembling with excertion as the kit began to emerge. Her teeth gritted against the stick that Newtflake had given her, her breath coming in ragged gasps. Poppypool guided her through each wave, her paws steady, even though her heart was racing.

"It's coming, Spiritsight, push," Poppypool urged, her eyes focused as the first kit slipped free, a tiny, dark-pelted she-cat.

"There we go, your first kit, Spiritsight. A strong one," Poppypool said softly, her paws quick to clean the newborn, rubbing her until her tiny lungs filled with air and her small, but vibrant wail filled

the den. She placed the kit gently beside Spiritsight's belly, where she nuzzled instinctively toward her mother's warmth.

"Darkkit," Spiritsight rasped between pants, her eyes blinking open just long enough to glance at the kit, though her face remained pinched with pain.

Poppypool barely had time to breathe before the next wave hit, and Spiritsight's body tensed again. "The second one is coming," she warned, shifting back into position.

Newtflake moved quickly to wet another piece of moss, pressing it against Spiritsight's muzzle while she panted. "You've got this, Spiritsight, you're strong, you can do this," he murmured, his voice low and reassuring.

Another cry broke into the air as the second kit– a sleek black tom– was born, his fur slick with fluid. Poppypool cleaned him with swift strokes, her heart clenching at teh sight of the small, fragile life in her paws. She placed him next to his sister, and Spiritsight whispered, "Crowkit..."

The third kit followed soon after, a larger, dark tom who yowled loudly as soon as he hit the air. "Condorkit," Spiritsight panted, her voice growing weaker, though her gaze was still sharp with determination.

Poppypool nodded at Newtflake as she placed the third kit beside the others, feeling the wet warmth of their small bodies pressed against her paws. "You're almost there, Spiritsight," she encouraged, though a sinking feeling started to take root in her chest. The labor was taking a toll, and she could see the exhaustion etched deeply into the queen's face.

The fourth and final kit– a tiny she-cat with black-and-white fur– arrived moments later, her arrival softer than the others but still strong. "Magpiekit," Spiritsight breathed, her head lolling back against the bedding.

"Four kits, Spiritsight. You did it," Poppypool said gently, moving quickly to clean the she-kit and place her with her siblings. But

Spiritsight's breathing had grown shallow, and her body trembled with each labored breath.

Newtflake's voice wavered with concern as he hovered at her side. "Poppypool...something's wrong."

Poppypool's heart dropped as she saw the blood pooling beneath Spiritsight. Too much blood. Far too much. She moved quickly, her paws trembling slightly as she pressed down on Spiritsight's belly to stem the bleeding, but the flow wouldn't stop.

"Spiritsight, stay with me," Poppypool whispered, panic gnawing at her resolve. She glanced at Newtflake, her voice tight. "Get more moss. We need to stop the bleeding."

Newtflake rushed to her side, his paws working swiftly to grab more moss, but the blood soaked through faster than they could mop it up. Spiritsight's eyes fluttered, her breath coming in shallow, gasping pants.

"Poppypool..." she murmured, her voice weak, distant. "I see her...I see Darkeyes..."

Poppypool's breath hitched as she looked up from her work, her eyes following Spiritsight's gaze to the entrance of the nursery. There was nothing there but sunlight and the shadows of the Clan stirring outside. But Spiritsight's eyes were wide, her pupils dilated as if seeing something far beyond the living world.

"Spiritsight, no, stay with us!" Poppypool begged, pressing harder, but the blood kept coming, slipping through her paws like water.

Newtflake's voice cracked, his voice palpable. "Please, Spiritsight, you can't leave them, not now, not your kits!"

But Spiritsight's gaze was fixed on something neither of them could see. "Darkeyes...she's waiting for me..." she whispered, her voice fading into nothingness. And then, with a final, shuddering breath, Spiritsight went still.

The silence in the den was deafening. Poppypool's paws trembled, stained red with blood that refused to stop flowing. Newtflake stood

frozen, his wide eyes locked on Spiritsight's lifeless body.

The kits mewled softly, nestled close to their mother, unaware of the tragedy that had just unfolded.

Poppypool closed her eyes, her heart heavy with grief as she leaned down to press her nose to Spiritsight's still-warm fur. "She's gone," she whispered, her voice barely audible.

Newtflake sank to the ground beside her, his voice small and broken. "What...what do we do now?"

Poppypool swallowed hard, her throat tight with emotion. She looked down at the four tiny kits, their small bodies warm and wriggling against each other. They would never know their mother's warm, never hear her soft purrs of love.

"We take care of them," Poppypool whispered, her voice thick with determination and sorrow. "We make sure they know she loved them."

But as she looked back at the bloodied ground beneath Spiritsight, Darkeyes' name echoed in her mind, chilling her to the bone.

*****

The moon hung heavy in the air, casting a cold silver light over the camp. Poppypool stepped carefully through the clearing, her paws feeling heavier with each step as she made her way the warriors' den. Her heart ached with the weight of the news she carried. Spiritsight was gone, taken too soon, and now it was time to tell the one cat who would feel the loss even more deeply than the rest– Hickorytree.

She found him sitting just outside the den, his broad shoulders hunched as he stared blankly at the stars. The recent days had been hard on him with rogues encroaching on their territory, but nothing could prepare him for what was coming now. Poppypool drew in a deep breath, steadying herself before approaching him.

"Hickorytree," she called softly, her voice strained with grief.

He turned, his eyes filled with curiosity, then concern, as he noticed the somber expression on her face. "Poppypool? Is something wrong? How's Spiritsight?"

The words caught in her throat, but she forced herself to meet his gaze. "Spiritsight...she–" Her voice faltered, and for a heartbeat, she wasn't sure if she could say it. But she had to. For him, for Spiritsight, for their kits.

"She's gone, Hickorytree," she whispered, her voice trembling as the truth broke free. "She didn't survive the birth."

His eyes widened, and for a moment, there was nothing but stunned silence. He blinked, as if trying to make sense of the words she'd just spoken. "No...no, that can't be right," he murmured, shaking his head as if denial alone could change the reality.

Poppypool felt a lump form in her throat, watching the devastation spread across his face. "I'm so sorry," she whispered, her heart breaking as he stood, his legs wobbling beneath him.

"No! She...she was supposed to make it. Spiritsight was supposed to be here to raise them," Hickorytree choked out, his voice raw with grief. "She...she was strong. How did this happen?"

Poppypool lowered her head, guilt gnawing at her insides even though she knew she'd done everything she could. "We tried. Newtflake and I...we tried everything. But the bleeding wouldn't stop."

Hickorytree's chest heaved as he gasped for breath, his gaze distant as he struggled to process the loss. "The kits?" he whispered hoarsely, as though that was the last hope he had left. "Did they survive?"

Poppypool nodded quickly, her voice steady despite the ache in her chest. "They're alive. Four kits– Darkkit, Crowkit, Condorkit, and Magpiekit. They're healthy and strong."

A flicker of relief passed through his grief-stricken face, but it was quickly drowned out by sorrow. Hickorytree's body trembled, but to

Poppypool's surprise, he took a step toward her, his eyes glassy with tears.

"Thank you, Poppypool," he said quietly, his voice trembling. "Thank you for helping her..for saving them."

Poppypool blinked, taken aback. She hadn't expected gratitude, not when she felt like she had failed to save Spiritsight. Her gaze darted to the ground, her paws shifting nervously. "I'm so sorry I couldn't save her..."

But Hickorytree shook his head, tears now streaming down his face. "You did what you could. You...you tried. I know you did." His voice cracked as he spoke, and without another word, he slipped past her, heading toward the nursery.

Poppypool stood frozen as he disappeared inside, the sound of his anguished wail echoing from the den. The sound cut deep into her heart, and for a moment, she couldn't breathe. She knew what he was seeing– his mate lying still, her body cold after the hours spent cleaning the blood from her fur and changing moss, surrounded by the small, helpless kits she had given her life to bring into the world.

The Clan had begun to gather, their hushed murmurs filling the clearing as they realized what had happened. One by one, their gazes turning to the nursery, to Hickorytree's heartbreaking cries, and the weight of the loss settled over the camp like a suffocating fog.

Poppypool stood apart, her head lowered as grief swirled around her. The Clan would mourn Spiritsight tonight– just as they had Darkeyes, just as they had Stormfern. And each death weighed heavier on her shoulders than the last. Despite knowing she hadn't caused Spiritsight's passing, Poppypool felt as though she was responsible for her death.

She glanced toward the nursery once more, where Hickorytree remained at his mate's side, his tears falling onto her lifeless body as their kits mewled softly in the nest. He had lost his mate, but at least he still had his kits.

But as Poppypool watched, a hollow ache filled her chest. Would there ever come a time when she could ease this grief– or was she only doomed to bring more of it into the world?

The stars above seemed to dim, silent as ever, as if StarClan themselves were mourning with them.

*****

The cold night air was thick with sorrow as Poppypool stood near the nursery, watching the Clan gather in somber silence. One by one, the warriors, Otterfire, and apprentices padded over to comfort Hickorytree or peer inside at the tiny, squealing kits who had been born into the world only moments before their mother had left it.

Poppypool felt like an outsider among them, standing alone, the weight of another loss pressing heavily on her chest. Newtflake lingered by her side, his fur brushing hers, offering silent support as they watched the Clan mourn.

"She was so strong," her apprentice murmured after a long silence, his voice barely audible above the soft murmurs of the Clan. His eyes were fixed on the entrance to the nursery, where Hickorytree's devastated form was still draped over Spiritsight's body. "It's so unfair...she didn't deserve this."

Poppypool nodded numbly, the guilt swirling inside her like a storm. She had done everything she could to save Spiritsight, but it hadn't been enough. *She* hadn't been enough.

"What are we going to do?" Newtflake whispered, his voice laced with sadness. "The Clan is going to be crushed by this. First Darkeyes, then Stormfern, now Spiritsight...it feels like we're losing everyone."

Poppypool glanced at him, seeing the worry etched in his face. He wasn't wrong. The Clan had been struck by one tragedy after another. The rogues prowling their borders, the growing tension, and now this... it was all too much.

As they sat in silence, Sparrowstar emerged from her den, her

brown tabby fur dull in the pale moonlight. She walked slowly, her tail dragging on the ground as she approached the gathered Clan. Her expression was heavy with grief, her eyes clouded with sorrow.

"We will honor Spiritsight tonight," Sparrowstar said quietly, her voice thick with emotion. "She gave her life to bring new life into the world. Her kits will know the love of the entire Clan, just as she would have wanted."

The Clan murmured in agreement, but the weight of Spiritsight's loss still hung over them like a dark cloud. Poppypool could feel their sadness, their frustration, and their fear. Every cat seemed to be wondering the same thing– who would be next?

Hickorytree finally emerged from the nursery, his eyes red and swollen from crying. He carried one of the kits by the scruff, setting it gently in the camp next to Spiritsight's body. His movements were slow, as if the effort to keep going was too much for him.

"Darkkit, Crowkit, Condorkit, and Magpiekit..." he murmured softly, naming each of his kits as he nuzzled them close to their mother. His voice trembled with emotion. "They'll never know her. They'll never feel her warmth." His body shuddered, and he let out a long, shaky breath, struggling to hold back tears.

Poppypool's heart clenched painfully at the sight. The Clan was falling apart, and she felt powerless to stop it. She had failed Spiritsight, and now she was failing Hickorytree too. The weight of her failures was suffocating.

As the Clan began to settle for the night, preparing to sit vigil for the fallen queen, Poppypool felt a cold wave of guilt wash over her. She couldn't escape the feeling that all of this– the death, the grief, the suffering– was somehow her fault. It was her curse, her punishment for the blood on her paws.

"We'll take care of the kits," Newtflake whispered gently, his eyes searching Poppypool's for reassurance. "We'll make sure they grow up strong. Hickorytree isn't alone in this."

Poppypool nodded, but her thoughts were far away. She had to do

more than help raise Spiritsight's kits. She had to make things right. But how?

That night, as the Clan gathered around Spiritsight's body, Poppypool stood at the edge of the vigil, her mind racing. Rowantail's voice echoed in her ears, his cruel voice lingering like a shadow over everything she did.

"You'll never escape me. You'll regret everything."

She shivered, her paws trembling as the weight of his words pressed down on her. How many more cats would suffer because of her? How many more lives would be lost before she found a way to stop him?

She knew she had to act, but she didn't know how. The path before her was clouded with doubt and fear, and the looming presence of the rogues only made it harder to think clearly.

Suddenly, her thoughts were interrupted by a soft touch.. Hawkflight appeared at her side, his eyes filled with concern.

"Poppypool, you don't have to carry this alone," he whispered. "I know something's been weighing on you. You can talk to me. I'm your brother, let me help."

She opened her mouth to speak, but the words wouldn't come. What could she say? How could she confess the truth when it would only destroy him?

Instead, she lowered her head and shook it slightly. "I'm just tired, Hawkflight." Her voice was hollow, and even she knew it sounded like a lie.

Hawkflight's eyes narrowed, but he didn't push any further. He sighed, his tail brushing hers before stepping back. "When you're ready, I'm here."

As he walked away, Poppypool's heart ached with the knowledge that she couldn't let him in– not yet. Not while Rowantail's hold over her was still so strong.

But as she stared up at the cold, distant stars, she knew she had to find a way to break free. For Hickorytree, for Spiritsight's kits, and for the Clan she swore to protect.

She just had to figure out how.

Chapter 11

The morning after Spiritsight's death, the camp was eerily silent. Cats moved slowly, their conversations hushed and grief-stricken as the loss of the queen weighed heavily on their hearts. Poppypool emerged from her den with a heavy heart, her paws feeling like lead as she forced herself to face the day. She knew the Clan still watched her with wary eyes, her healing injuries not helping her in the slightest.

She spotted Hickorytree lying in the nursery entrance, staring blankly at the ground while his four kits squirmed in the nest behind him. Newtflake was already by his side, bringing fresh moss and offering quiet words of comfort, but Poppypool could see the emptiness in Hickorytree's gaze. He was devastated.

"Poppypool," a voice snapped her attention back to reality. It was Stormfern's old apprentice, Flamefrost, his blue eyes narrowing as he padded over to the medicine cat. "What happened to you?" The question wasn't friendly; there was an edge of accusation in his tone. "You've been acting strange ever since Stormfern..." He hesitated, seeming unable to speak of his mentor's death. "Are you okay?"

Poppypool stiffened, the memory of Rowantail's attack still fresh on her mind. Her body ached from the injuries he'd inflicted in the Dark Forest, but she couldn't explain that to Flamefrost- or anyone else. "I'm fine," she lied, trying to keep her voice steady. "I've just been...tired. The loss of our Clanmates is hard on all of us."

Flamefrost didn't seemed convinced, his tail twitching in agitation. "If you say so," he muttered, turning and padding off to join Adderseed and Birchpaw for a training session. Poppypool sighed, knowing the suspicions were only growing. Every cat seemed to sense something was wrong, but she couldn't risk telling the truth. Not yet.

As the day wore on, Poppypool found herself restless. The growing

threat of the rogues weighed heavily on the Clan's warriors, and the tension from recent skirmishes was palpable. Sparrowstar had increased patrols, hoping to keep the invaders at bay, but the atmosphere in the camp was one of unease.

While collecting long grass near the medicine den, Poppypool overheard Foxpelt and Nutfur discussing the most recent battle.

"That last attack wasn't like anything we've seen before," Foxpelt growled, her eyes narrowing as she conversed with her mate. "They were more organized this time. I'd bet a moon's worth of dawn patrols that they have a leader pulling their tails."

Nutfur nodded in agreement. "They're not acting like typical rogues. It's like they're looking for one cat and whomever they hurt is just collateral."

Poppypool's ears pricked at their conversation. The rogues were becoming bolder, and the Clan's borders were in constant danger. Yet, she couldn't help but wonder if the Dark Forest had something to do with it. Was Rowantail orchestrating these attacks, or was this just another danger looming on the horizon?

Her thoughts were interrupted when Newtflake approached her, his eyes filled with worry. "Poppypool, you haven't been resting. I can see it in your eyes, you're pushing yourself too hard."

Poppypool gave him a weary smile, appreciating his concern. "I'm fine, Newtflake. There's just... a lot going on. The Clan needs us."

Newtflake hesitated, then sighed. "I know, but you don't have to carry this burden alone. I'm here to help."

His words touched her, but they also reminded her of the heavy secret she carried like a sickness. She wanted to tell him the truth, to confide in her apprentice, but the weight of Rowantail's threats held her back. Instead, she nodded and said, "Thank you. I'll get some rest soon."

That night, Poppypool lay in her nest, staring out at the stars in the night sky. They were cold and distant, their light offering no

comfort. Rowantail's voice echoed in her mind, promising that she could never escape him, that he would haunt her until she fulfilled his twisted desires.

But Poppypool had made her choice. She wouldn't kill for him again.

As her eyes drifted shut, she felt herself slipping into the darkness of sleep, but instead of the familiar, looming presence of Rowantail, she found herself in a desolate, starless landscape. The Dark Forest.

A voice, soft and haunting, called her name from the shadows. "Poppypool..."

She turned, her heart pounding in her chest as she saw the faint outlines of two cats emerging from the darkness. Stormfern and Darkeyes, their pelts eerily translucent, their eyes glowing with malice.

"You thought you could escape us, didn't you?" Stormfern's voice was sharp, laced with bitterness. "You think you can defy the Dark Forest and walk away unscathed?"

Poppypool backed away, her heart racing as their figures loomed closer. "I won't kill for him anymore," she said, her voice trembling. "I won't."

The shadows around her seemed to tighten, closing in like a suffocating fog. Poppypool's breath quickened as the darkness pressed down on her. Just when she thought she couldn't breathe anymore, another voice cut through the gloom.

"Poppypool!"

She jolted awake, gasping for air, her heart hammering in her chest. Newtflake was standing over her, his eyes wide with concern. "Are you okay? You were thrashing in your sleep..."

Poppypool blinked, trying to shake off the lingering terror of the dream. "I'm fine," she whispered, though her voice betrayed her fear. "Just a bad dream."

Newtflake didn't seem convinced, but he didn't press the issue. "You don't have to go through this alone, Poppypool," he said softly, echoing his earlier words. "If something's wrong, you can tell me. I'm here to help."

Poppypool's heart ached at his sincerity, but the burden of her secret weighed on her. She forced a smile and nodded. "I know. Thank you, Newtflake. I'll be okay."

But as Newtflake returned to his own nest, Poppypool's mind raced too much to go back to sleep. The whispers of the Dark Forest were growing louder, and the Clan's suspicion of her was growing stronger. She had to find a way to end this nightmare before it consumed her- and everyone she cared about.

But how?

As the first lights of dawn approached, a patrol was sent out by Sparrowstar, who had been taking over Hickorytree's deputy duties for the time being. As the sun began to rise, the patrol returned, battered and bloodied from another encounter with the rogues. The leader of the patrol was Frogstep, who had slash marks across his face as blood pooled into his eyes. Sparrowstar was the first to hurry to the patrol, asking what had happened as the limping cats funneled into the camp. The threat of the rogues was mounting now more than ever, and the Clan was being stretched to its limits.

Poppypool watched as the injured warriors were brought to her den, her paws trembling as the weight of everything pressed down on her. Between the rising rogue threat, the Dark Forest's influence, and the growing suspicion from her own Clanmates, Poppypool knew time was running out.

She had to act, but the path forward was murky and more dangerous than ever.

*****

The sun hung high in the sky, casting a warm orange glow over the camp. The apprentices were chattering amongst themselves like starlings, seeming oblivious to the threats and dangers that were

closing in on the Clan. Poppypool sat by the entrance of the medicine den, staring blankly as cats walked by, their shadows stretching across the ground. Rest and sleep evaded her following patching up the dawn patrol's injuries, and the weight of the Dark Forest's threats pressed heavily down on her.

She heard the soft pawsteps before she saw him. Newtflake padded quietly up to her side, his yellow-green eyes filled with concern and exhaustion as he sat down next to her. He'd been hovering nearby all day, clearly worried, though he hadn't yet confronted her.

"You haven't slept again, have you?" Newtflake's voice was gentle, but there was a firmness in it. "You can't keep doing this to yourself, Poppypool. You're running yourself into the ground like a gopher."

Poppypool sighed, her shoulders slumping. She couldn't keep pushing him away. Not forever. He cared too much, and he was too observant for his own good. She knew if she didn't say anything soon, he'd start asking even more questions- and she couldn't let him know the entire truth yet.

"I know," she whispered, her gaze still fixed on the ground. "I know I haven't been...myself. There's just a lot going on right now."

Newtflake's tail twitched as he studied her face, his concern deepening. "You've been distant. Ever since Stormfern died... and then Spiritsight... it's like you've been carrying something heavier than just grief." He paused, then added softly, "I want to help you, Poppypool. But I can't if you won't let me in."

The silence between them stretched on, the weight of his words settling in her chest. Poppypool knew he deserved more than the lies she'd been telling him. She owed him some form of the truth, even if she couldn't tell him everything yet.

She swallowed hard, trying to find the right words. "There are...things I can't explain, Newtflake. Things I'm not proud of." Her voice wavered, and she forced herself to meet his eyes. "I've made mistakes, big ones. And they're haunting me."

Newtflake's eyes widened slightly, but he didn't interrupt. He leaned

in a little closer, his expression softening. "What kind of mistakes?"

Poppypool shook her head, feeling a lump rise in her throat. "I can't tell you everything. Not yet, but I need you to trust me. I'm trying to fix things, to make them right. It's just...harder than I thought it'd be."

Newtflake frowned, his brow furrowed with worry. "Poppypool, whatever it is, you don't have to face it alone. I'm your apprentice, but I'm also your friend. Let me help, please."

His genuine concern made her heart ache. She wanted so badly to tell him more, to spill everything about Rowantail, the Dark Forest, and the truth about Darkeyes and Stormfern's deaths. But if she did, she knew she would put him in danger. The darkness that followed her was too close, too threatening. She couldn't let it consume him too.

"Just knowing you're here...helps more than you know," she said quietly, offering him a small, tired smile. "But this is something I have to handle by myself for the time being. I promise you, I'm trying. Just... don't ask too many questions right now."

Newtflake stared at her for a long moment, his eyes searching hers for answers she couldn't give. Then, slowly, he nodded, though the worry in his gaze didn't fade. "I trust you, Poppypool," he murmured, his voice filled with quiet conviction. "But I'm not going anywhere. If you need me, I'll be right here."

Poppypool felt a surge of gratitude toward him, though it was tinged with guilt. She was hiding so much from him, and yet he still stood by her side. She only hoped she wouldn't let him down.

"Thank you, Newtflake," she whispered, her voice barely audible as she leaned against him, just for a moment, taking comfort in his presence. "Thank you."

For now, she had bought herself a little more time. But she knew the day would come when she'd have to tell him the whole truth. And when that day came, she wasn't sure what would happen- or how much longer she could keep her secrets buried.

Chapter 12

The air was crisp with the scent of early morning dew as Poppypool padded across the moorland, her eyes scanning her surroundings for any herbs that might be useful. The sunlight barely lit her way as dawn arrived, the bite in the air from the hint of early leaf-fall. She had come out early, hoping to clear her mind with the rhythmic task of collecting herbs, but an uneasy feeling gnawed at her. She felt a little better after speaking with Newtflake, but the weight of so much unsaid crushed her chest like a boulder.

She bent down to inspect a patch of goldenrod when the sound of pawsteps made her stiffen. Glancing over her shoulder, she was surprised to see Hawkflight padding up to her. His yellow eyes, usually warm and understanding, were narrowed with a simmering intensity.

"You didn't tell me you were going on an herb-gathering patrol," he said, his tone sharp as he fell into step beside her. "You know it's not safe with the rogues prowling around." There was no hint of friendliness in his voice today- just tension.

Poppypool sighed, trying to stay calm. "I needed to get out early and clear my head. There's been a lot to do lately."

"That's not all that's been going on and you know it." Hawkflight's gaze pierced into her, and Poppypool felt her fur prickle with unease. "You've been distant, and don't tell you're just tired, Poppy. Something's wrong."

She didn't respond right away, choosing instead to focus on the goldenrod. But she could feel his stare burning into her pelt, demanding an answer.

"I'm fine, Hawkflight," she said, trying to keep her voice steady. "I'm just dealing with a lot, but I can handle it."

Hawkflight's tail lashed in frustration. "That's not good enough,

Poppypool. You've been acting strange for moons. You're not just tired- you're hiding something." He stepped in front of her, blocking her path. "Why won't you just talk to me? I'm your brother, why are you shutting me out?"

Poppypool froze, her heart pounding in her chest. She had known this conversation was coming, but it didn't make it any easier. Hawkflight deserved the truth, but how could she tell him? How could she make him understand without dragging him into the darkness she was trapped in?

"It's not that simple," she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper. "I can't...I can't tell you what's going on. Not yet."

Hawkflight's eyes flared with anger, and he took a step closer, his fur bristling. "Not yet? What does that even mean?" His voice rose, louder now, echoing across the quiet grasslands. "Every time I try to talk to you, you push me away. Do you think I can't tell when something's wrong? I'm your brother- I *know* you."

Poppypool flinched, her heart twisting painfully in her chest. She opened her mouth to speak, but Hawkflight cut her off, his frustration seeming to boil over.

"I've watched you shut me out time and time again. You won't tell me anything! Do you think I'm just supposed to stand by and pretend everything's fine while you fall apart in front of me?" His voice cracked with emotion, and Poppypool could see the hurt in his eyes. "I want to help you, but how am I supposed to if you won't even trust me enough to tell me what's going on?"

Poppypool took a shaky breath, her vision blurring with unshed tears. "I'm trying to protect you, Hawkflight. If I told you, you'd be in danger. It's not that I don't trust you- I just...I can't."

Hawkflight's ears flattened and his tail lashed again, harder this time. "Danger? From what? You're not making any sense." His voice was hard now, his patience gone. "This is about more than just danger. You don't trust me enough to share what's bothering you, and I can't keep watching you suffer like this."

Poppypool's throat tightened and she shook her head, struggling to hold back the tears threatening to spill over. "Please, Hawkflight, you don't understand. I...I can't explain it. Not yet."

But her words only seemed to fuel his anger. "Not yet, not yet- that's all you ever say!" Hawkflight snapped, his voice breaking with a mix of frustration and pain. "If you're not going to let me help you, then you're on your own."

He turned on his paws, muscles tense as he stormed away. Poppypool's heart shattered as she called after him, her voice desperate and pleading.

"Hawkflight, wait!" Her voice cracked with emotion, but he didn't stop. "Please..."

But her brother didn't turn back. He vanished down a hill, leaving Poppypool standing alone, her tears streaming down her cheeks and peppering the ground. She sank to the ground, her legs trembling as sobs wracked her body.

For the first time in her life, she felt truly alone. Hawkflight had always been her anchor, her source of strength. But now...now, she wasn't sure if she'd ever get him back. And worst of all? She knew it was all her fault.

*****

Poppypool curled tightly in her nest, staring blankly at the den wall, her body heavy with exhaustion and grief. After the confrontation with Hawkflight, her spirit felt crushed, the weight of her guilt and the lies were suffocating her. It was all too much. She just couldn't keep going like this- not today. She buried her face in her paws, trying to block out the world around her.

Footsteps padded softly nearby, and Newtflake entered, the scent of fresh herbs wreathing around the den. His soft footfalls approached her, and while she didn't look up, she knew he was concerned.

"Poppypool," Newtflake began gently, his voice hesitant as if he was unsure of what to say. "I finished tending to the dawn patrol's

injuries. Frogstep... he's blind in one eye after the rogue attack, but he's strong and his other eye is unharmed. He'll be okay and he sends his thanks."

Poppypool slowly lifted her head, her eyes dull and lifeless. She should've been out there, tending to Frogstep and the rest of the patrol, but she couldn't bring herself to move from the nest that seemed to have become her only solace. She felt like a coward.

"You've done well, Newtflake," she murmured, her voice hollow. "Thank you for handling everything. I...I just can't today."

Newtflake dipped his head, but there was a flash of concern in his eyes. "It's alright, Poppypool, you need rest. I can handle things for now." His tone was gentle, but the worry behind it was clear.

He busied himself sorting herbs while Poppypool remained where she was, curled into herself in the far corner of the den. She watched him work, noting his careful movements and the way he gently handled each cat's needs. He was growing into a skilled healer, he didn't need her hovering over him.

"Frogstep was calm when I told him about his half-blindness," Newtflake continued after a long silence. "He's strong, he'll be alright."

Poppypool only nodded, her gaze fixed on the floor of the den. Her mind was drifting, swirling with thoughts she couldn't quite grasp. The tension, the confrontation with Hawkflight, the suffocating presence of Rowantail's looming demands- it all seemed to press in on her until she felt like she was drowning.

Newtflake glanced over at her, his tail flicking nervously. "Are you sure you don't want to take a walk or-"

"No." Her voice was sharper than she intended, and she saw his ears flick back in response. Guilt gnawed at her, but she couldn't muster the strength to apologize. "I'll just stay here. You don't need me hovering, you're doing fine."

He hesitated, but then dipped his head in understanding. "Alright, I'll be nearby if you need anything."

As Newtflake returned to his duties, Poppypool lowered her head back to her paws. The sounds of the healer's den continued- Birchpaw whimpering as a thorn was stuck in his paw and Newtflake's gentle reassurances- but she felt more isolated than ever.

It wasn't long before the guilt came creeping back into her mind, whispering that she should be out with him helping. But the weight of everything- her failures, her secrets, the darkness of Rowantail- held her down. Even though Newtflake was there, it was like an invisible barrier separated her from him and the world around her.

She was trapped in her own mind, her own guilt, and no one could save her from it. Not even herself.

Chapter 13

The attack began at dawn, just as the first rays of sunlight peeked over the horizon, casting long shadows across the Clan's camp. Poppypool was in the medicine den, still lying in her nest, when the alarm yowl shattered the morning's stillness.

Her heart raced as she jolted up, ears straining to make sense of the chaos unfolding outside. The sound of claws raking through fur, the vicious snarls of battle, and the panicked shouts of her Clanmates echoed outside the den. A rogue attack. The rogues had come- unexpected, vicious, and with bloodlust in their eyes.

Newtflake was already on his paws, rushing to grab supplies from the herb storage, his eyes wide with fear. "Poppypool!" he called out, his voice laced with urgency. "We have to get ready! There'll be injuries flooding in soon."

But Poppypool could barely focus. The overwhelming sounds of the battle raged in her ears as she looked outside the den and saw her brother, Hawkflight, in the thick of the fight. He was a blur of tri-color fur, claws out, engaged with two rogues much larger than him. The sight froze her in place, her stomach twisting in knots of fear and guilt.

Hawkflight needed her, but all she could think about was their argument, his harsh words still ringing in her ears. *"If you're not going to let me help you, then you're on your own."*

Before she could move, Newtflake nudged her hard, snapping her out of her daze. "Poppypool, now isn't the time to freeze up! We need to move- before more of our Clanmates get hurt!"

Poppypool's paws felt like stone, but the urgency in Newtflake's voice finally pulled her out of her shock. She grabbed the herbs he handed her and rushed outside, her heart pounding in her chest.

The camp was in chaos. Warriors and rogues clashed in a deadly

dance of claws and fangs, fur flying as they fought for dominance. Screeches of pain pierced the air as blood splattered the ground beneath them. The acrid scent of fear and battle flooded her senses as Poppypool weaved through the chaos, trying to stay out of the fray while keeping an eye on the battle.

Hawkflight was holding his own for now, his muscles straining as he fought back against the two rogues, but he was outnumbered. His breaths were coming in ragged pants, and she could see the glint of desperation in his eyes.

Then it happened- one of the rogues feinted, distracting Hawkflight just long enough for the other to strike. A flash of claws raked across Hawkflight's flank, sending him sprawling with a yowl of pain.

"No!" Poppypool's voice came out as a strangled cry. Her legs moved before her mind caught up, carrying her straight into the battle without a second thought, leaving the herbs behind. She didn't care about her fear anymore, didn't care about Rowantail or the Dark Forest's shadow hanging over her. She had to save her brother.

She threw herself at the rogue who had struck Hawkflight, her claws sinking into his pelt. The rogue then turned on her with a snarl, his yellow eyes gleaming with malice. For a moment, Poppypool faltered, but she forced herself to dig in deeper, raking her claws across his side.

The rogue hissed in pain, but before he could retaliate, Hawkflight had recovered. With a powerful leap, he slammed into the rogue from the side, knocking him away. The two siblings stood side by side now, panting heavily, but united in their fight.

"Get back to the den!" Hawkflight growled, though there was no anger in his voice- only worry. "You're not a fighter, Poppypool!"

But Poppypool shook her head, her eyes wide with determination. "I'm not leaving you!"

Another rogue lunged toward them, and Hawkflight braced for the impact, but this time, Poppypool was ready. She darted to the side,

slashing at the rogue's exposed side and knocking him off balance. Together, she and Hawkflight beat the rogue back and forced him to retreat.

For a moment, it seemed like the battle was turning in the Clan's favor. But then, out of the corner of her eye, Poppypool saw a figure approaching her, moving with slow, deliberate steps through the chaos. Her blood turned to ice as she suspected this was the rogue's leader.

He was a large tom, his pelt mottled with scars, his eyes gleaming with sinister intelligence. But what terrified Poppypool the most wasn't his size or strength- it was the cold, knowing look he gave her. He stared at her as if he saw right through her, as if he knew every secret she'd fought to keep hidden.

The rogue leader chuckled darkly, his voice carrying over the noise of battle. "So this is the famous Poppypool. I've heard whispers about you."

Poppypool's breath caught in her throat. *How does he know me?*

"You think you can escape him?" the rogue leader sneered, stepping closer. "Rowantail's reach goes far beyond this pathetic Clan. You're his puppet, Poppypool, and you'll never be free of him."

The words hit her like a blow to the chest. She stumbled back, her mind spinning. How could this rogue possibly know about Rowantail? Was he part of Rowantail's plan all along?

Before she could respond, Hawkflight lunged at the rogue leader, his claws outstretched in a desperate attempt to protect her. The rogue leader dodged with a flick of his tail, effortlessly avoided the attack.

"You'll regret ever crossing us," the rogue leader hissed, his eyes locking onto Poppypool's. Then, with a sharp yowl, he called out to his rogues. "Retreat!"

And just like that, the battle was over. The rogues scattered, retreating from the grasslands, leaving behind the wreckage of their

attack. Poppypool stood frozen in place, her mind reeling. The Clan had surprised, but the rogue leader's words echoed in her ears, filling her with dread.

As the adrenaline began to fade, Poppypool turned to Hawkflight, who was panting heavily, his flank bleeding from the earlier wound. "Are you okay?" she whispered, her voice trembling.

Hawkflight nodded, but there was a hard look in his eyes. "We need to talk to Sparrowstar. That rogue knew something- about you."

Poppypool swallowed hard, her heart pounding. She couldn't deny it anymore. The danger she'd tried so hard to keep hidden was now out in the open. And it wasn't just her life at risk- it was the whole Clan.

But she wasn't ready to face that truth yet, not with Rowantail haunting her every step.

*****

As the sun dipped slowly below the horizon, the weight of the day's battle settled heavily on Poppypool's shoulders. She and Newtflake had worked tirelessly to treat the injured, their paws moved with practiced efficiency despite the grief weighing on them. The bodies of Umberflame, Rosefur, Foggyrain, and Hawkstreak had been found, cleaned up, and laid out for their vigil, their once vibrant pelts now still in death. The loss was palpable, each loss leaving an aching void in the Clan. Newtflake in particular was taking the loss hard as Foggyrain was his littermate.

Sparrowstar, weakened but still clinging to life, had been brought into the leader's den. She had lost two of her lives to the wounds inflicted by the rogues and the blood loss that came after. Though Poppypool managed to stop the bleeding, the Clan would still be reeling from the attack for moons to come. The weight of leadership and the pressure to keep everyone safe threatened to crush her.

She felt hollow, moving as if in a trance as she gathered fresh herbs to treat the gash on her brother's flank. The wound wasn't life-threatening, but it needed proper care. He lay in the medicine den,

watching her as she approached with the poultice of goldenrod and cobwebs.

The silence between them was thick, the air heavy with unsaid words. Poppypool knelt beside him, her paws trembling slightly as she began to clean his wound. She could feel Hawkflight's eyes boring into her, filled with an intensity she couldn't ignore.

Finally, as she pressed cobwebs gently onto the gash, Hawkflight's voice cut through the silence like a claw through the air.

"Did you have anything to do with it?"

Poppypool's breath caught in her throat. She froze mid-motion, the cobwebs in her paw falling limp as her heart pounded in her chest. For a moment, she couldn't bring herself to look at him, couldn't meet the hard, accusing look in his eyes.

"Hawkflight, I-" She hesitated, her mind racing. *How could he even think that?* But deep down, she knew. The secrets she had been keeping, the darkness that had wrapped itself around her, were beginning to show. She couldn't hide it forever.

Hawkflight didn't give her a chance to evade the question. His voice was lower now, but no less intense. "The rogue leader- he knew something about you. Something you're not telling me," he leaned closer, his eyes searching hers, desperate for answers. "What aren't you telling me, Poppypool?"

Her throat tightened, and her paws shook as she resumed tending to his wound. "I didn't... I didn't have anything to do with this, Hawkflight," she whispered, the words tasting bitter in her mouth. It wasn't a lie, she hadn't orchestrated the raid, but it wasn't the full truth either. She couldn't explain the connection without revealing everything- about Rowantail, the Dark Forest, and the blood on her paws.

"I swear," she added, her voice shaking, "I would never hurt the Clan. You have to believe me."

Hawkflight studied her for a long moment, his eyes softening

slightly but still filled with confusion and frustration. "Then why does it feel like you're keeping something from me?" he asked, his voice quiet now, filled with hurt. "I know you, Poppy. I know when something's wrong. You've been distant for moons, and I don't know what's going on anymore."

Poppypool's chest tightened. Her brother's pain was palpable, and it felt like a physical weight pressing down on her. He deserved to know at least *some* of what was going on, just as Newtflake deserved to know as much as he does. Despite him deserving to know what was going on, she couldn't bear the thought of him looking at her like that- like he didn't trust her anymore.

After a moment of internal struggle, she continued to clean his wound, her voice barely above a whisper. "Our father," she said, her voice tight. "Rowantail... he's been visiting me in my dreams."

Hawkflight stiffened under her paws. "Rowantail? But he's-he's in the Dark Forest."

"I know," she whispered, not meeting his eyes as her heart thundered in her chest. "He...he speaks to me. I-"

"Why didn't you tell me this sooner?" Hawkflight interrupted, sounding crushed but his voice remained sharp, his tail lashing anxiously against the ground.

Poppypool swallowed hard, her eyes flicking to his injury as she moved to apply bandages, not meeting his gaze. "I didn't know how. I thought I could handle it on my own, but I...I can't." Her voice broke with emotion as tears pricked her eyes.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. Hawkflight's breaths came quicker, his emotions swirling in his eyes just beneath the surface. She could feel the tension in the air, knowing he was waiting for her to continue and explain everything. But for now, she couldn't. The rest of the truth- the killings, the poison, the darkness that had been consuming her- remained locked in her chest.

She pressed the herbs into his wound with a little more force as she began to wrap it, her voice shaking as she finished. "That's all I can

tell you right now."

Hawkflight narrowed his eyes, and for a heartbeat, Poppypool feared he was going to press her further, to demand the full story. But instead, he sighed, shaking his head slowly, as if trying to piece the puzzle together on his own.

"Rowantail's been in your dreams," he repeated, his voice quieter now, his voice laced with disbelief and frustration. "What does he want from you?"

Poppypool didn't answer, her paws wrapping the final cobwebs around his wound. She knew opening up even this much to Hawkflight put her on the edge of a dangerous precipice.

"He...he wants me to hurt the Clan," she whispered, keeping the worst part of the truth away. "That's all I can say."

Hawkflight stared at her for a long moment, his eyes searching hers. She felt his frustration, his desperation to understand what was really going on. But instead of pushing, he closed his eyes, exhaling slowly.

"Alright," he said finally, his voice resigned but still filled with worry. "But you know you don't have to face this alone, right? You don't have to keep me out."

Poppypool nodded silently, even though she knew in her heart she was keeping him at a distance. She stepped back, allowing Hawkflight to get to his paws, his movements slow and pained from the wound. He brushed his tail briefly against hers, a silent gesture of affection and concern.

"Just... be careful, Poppy," he murmured before padding out of the den.

She watched him leave, the weight of her secrets pressing harder on her chest. Though, she felt lighter after speaking to him. She opened up to him just enough, but not enough to release the full burden she was carrying. And now, even with that small truth shared, the burden she carried lessened ever so slightly.

Chapter 14

Poppypool lay in her nest, struggling to keep her eyes closed as her mind raced with thoughts of the rogue attack. The loss of four warriors weighed heavily on her heart- Umberflame, Rosefur, Foggyrain, and Hawkstreak were gone, their lives snuffed out like a spark. And Sparrowstar...she'd lost two of her lives in the battle and her den. The camp was on edge, every cat looking over their shoulder, wondering when the next attack would come.

Sleep tugged at her, but she resisted it. She knew what awaited her once she gave in. And sure enough, the moment her eyes fluttered shut, the darkness swallowed her whole.

When Poppypool opened her eyes again, she was no longer in the safety of GlacierClan's camp. She stood in the twisted, barren landscape of the Dark Forest. The trees loomed high above, gnarled and black as they creaked in the cold, still air. The scent of decay clung to everything, and the silence pressed down on her like a stone.

She knew who was coming.

"Quite the success, wasn't it?"

The voice, smoothe and full of malice, slithered into her ears. Poppypool whirled around to see Rowantail stepping out of the shadows, his yellow eyes gleaming with smug satisfaction. He looked exactly as he did the last time she saw him, only much more smug and dominant. But there was something darker about him now...something more twisted.

Poppypool's claws unsheathed instinctively, her muscles tensing with white-hot anger. "You got four warriors killed!" she spat, stepping forward as her fur bristled. "Sparrowstar lost two lives because of you!"

Rowantail merely chuckled, circling her with a slow, predatory

grace. "Oh, come now, Poppy," he purred, his voice dripping with condescension. "You didn't really think this would end any other way, did you? It's almost... *amusing*, how naive you are. Did you enjoy that little surprise when the rogue leader mentioned you?"

A cold shiver ran down Poppypool's spine at his words. The rogue leader had known her name- known things no rogue should have been aware of. She clenched her teeth, fury rising in her chest like a fire. "You sent them after GlacierClan! Are you planning on sending them again? Do you just want to watch my Clan die and disintegrate?"

Rowantail stopped circling her, his eyes narrowing with cruel amusement. "I could," he mused, his voice sickeningly casual. "Or maybe I'll aim higher next time. Would you like that? Perhaps the rogues could bring back more than blood. Perhaps they'll target those you care about... Hawkflight, Newtflake... or maybe that fresh litter of kits."

At that, Poppypool's fury boiled over, her heart pounding in her chest. She leaped forward, snarling with desperation. "Leave GlacierClan alone!" she growled, her voice raw with emotion. "My mistakes are mine! If you want to punish someone, then punish me! They don't deserve this!"

Rowantail's yellow eyes gleamed with satisfaction as he stepped closer, his breath hot against her fur. His tail flicked lightly along the healed wounds on her side, the same ones he'd inflicted on her before. "I already did," he whispered, his voice a cruel hiss. "But it seems you didn't get the message."

Poppypool flinched, her heart pounding so hard it hurt. She stepped back, her claws digging into the cold, dead earth. "Leave GlacierClan out of this," she snarled again, her voice trembling. "If you want someone to hurt, hurt me."

Rowantail's smile widened, as if her defiance only amused him further. "Oh, Poppypool," he said, his tone soft and patronizing. "You still don't understand, do you? I don't care about you- not really. You're just a tool; a means to an end."

He took a step back, his eyes gleaming with cold malice. "But I'll give you another chance to prove yourself," he sneered. "Fail me again, and GlacierClan won't be so lucky next time."

Poppypool's breath hitched in her throat as she watched him disappear into the shadows, his final words echoing in her mind. She felt the crushing weight of his threats bearing down on her, as if a heavy stone had been placed on her chest. She tried to scream after him, to call him back and make him promise to leave her Clan alone- but the words stuck in her throat.

Then, just as suddenly as she'd been pulled into the Dark Forest, Poppypool woke up.

Her eyes flew open, her body trembling with the force of the nightmare. She was back in the medicine den, the soft, familiar scents of herbs and moss surrounding her. But the chill from the Dark Forest clung to her fur, and her heart raced as if she were still standing there, face to face with Rowantail.

Newtflake stirred in his nest nearby, oblivious to his mentor's terror. For a moment, Poppypool watched him, her chest aching with guilt. He didn't know the darkness that haunted her- didn't know how close she'd come to dragging him and the rest of the Clan into it. She couldn't let Rowantail hurt them, not again.

But what could she do?

The first light of dawn began creeping through the den entrance, casting faint rays of warmth across the floor. Poppypool's thoughts raced, trying to find some way- any way- out of this nightmare. Rowantail's grip on her was tightening, and she could feel her options slipping away like water through her paws.

She had to protect GlacierClan. She had to find a way to stop him. But for the first time in her life, Poppypool wasn't sure if she was strong enough.

*****

The wind tugged at Newtflake's fur as he bent down to inspect a

patch of marigold growing at the edge of the moor. The herbs looked healthy, their golden petals just beginning to bloom. His heart lifted at the sight- Poppypool would be glad to to have more supplies. He straightened up and glanced at Cedarpelt and Daisystep- his escorts.

"This should be enough to last us for a while," Newtflake said, flicking his tail toward the patch. "We can head back before the wind gets worse."

Daisystep stretched lazily, her fur ruffling in the breeze. "I'll grab some yarrow. You never know when it might come in handy." Her voice was light, but Newtflake noticed how the wind carried a faint tension through the grasses. The moor seemed unusually quiet.

Newtflake's ears twitched as a gust of wind shifted the tall grass, revealing a glimpse of something moving just beyond their sight. Before he could say a word, a low growl tore throught he stillness.

Daisystep's yelp shattered the air as a blur of dark brown fur slammed into her. The rogue's claws gleamed in the sunlight as it pinned her down.

"Daisystep!" Newtflake's breath caught in his throat, his paws frozen for a heartbeat before instinct took over. "Get off her!"

Cedarpelt let out a snarl and lunged toward Daisystep's attacker, but another rogue appeared from the tall grass, ramming into Cedarpelt's side and sending him sprawling away.

Newtflake's pulse pounded in his ears. He backed away as three more rogues emerged from the shadows, their eyes gleaming with malice.

"Run, Newtflake!" Daisystep's voice rang out through gritted teeth, but she was quickly drowned out by the sounds of the struggle.

Newtflake couldn't breathe. His mind screamed for him to flee, to get help, but his paws stayed rooted to the ground. The closest rogue turned toward him, eyes narrowing with deadly intent. Newtflake barely had time to react before the rogue pounced, claws

flashing through the air.

Pain exploded in his side as the rogue's claws ripped through his flesh. He yowled in agony, stumbling back as blood poured from the gash. He could hear Cedarpelt's grunts of effort and the thuds of bodies crashing into one another, but Daisystep's cries had fallen eerily silent.

With a surge of desperation, Newtflake kicked the rogue off him, struggling to stay on his paws. His vision blurred, but he could make out the twisted, brutal battle ahead of him. Cedarpelt was still fighting, barely managing to keep on rogue at bay while another circled behind him.

"Daisystep," Newtflake choked, eyes scanning for his fallen Clanmate. His heart stopped when he saw her, limp and motionless on the ground, blood staining the moor. "No..." His paws felt heavy, like they were sinking into the earth, but there was no time to mourn. He had to save Cedarpelt, he had to get them out of there before it was too late.

Another rogue rushed at him, but this time Newtflake was ready. He dodged to the side, ignoring the burning pain in his flank, and launched himself toward Cedarpelt. The senior warrior was struggling against the weight of the two rogues, his breathing labored and shallow.

With a roar that surprised even himself, Newtflake leaped onto one of the rogues attacking Cedarpelt, raking his claws down his spine. The rogue let out a screech of pain, whirling around to face him, but Newtflake didn't let go. His teeth sank into the rogue's scruff, and he kicked wildly with his back legs, forcing the cat to retreat.

Cedarpelt staggered, blood dripping from his pelt. His eyes were glazed, his legs trembling beneath him.

"We need to go!" Newtflake gasped, pushing his body against Cedarpelt to support his weight. The rogue he'd injured was already recovering, growling in fury as he prepared to attack again.

Cedarpelt groaned weakly. "I...I can't..."

Newtflake gritted his teeth, the scent of blood overwhelming his senses. He knew there was no time left- Daisystep was dead, and Cedarpelt wouldn't surivive if they stayed. Heaving the older tom onto his back, Newtflake stumbled forward, every muscle in his body screaming in protest as he carried Cedarpelt away from the fight.

The rogues didn't follow.

*****

The journey back to camp felt like a nightmare. Every step sent waves of pain through Newtflake's body, and Cedarpelt's weight was unbearable. Blood slicked his fur and coated the ground beneath them. Daisystep's lifeless body flashed in his mind over and over, but he pushed the image away. He had to keep going and save Cedarpelt.

When GlacierClan's camp finally came into view, Newtflake could hardly believe it. He stumbled into the clearing, his legs giving out beneath him as he collapsed under Cedarpelt's weight.

"Help!" he rasped, barely able to life his head. "Help us!"

As the camp erupted in chaos around him, Newtflake let his body go limp, the last remnants of his strength slipping away. He couldn't stop the images of the attack from replaying in his mind- the rogues' cruel eyes, Daisystep's broken body, Cedarpelt's pained groans.

"They knew I was a medicine cat," Newtflake rasped, staring up at Poppypool as she rushed to his side, her eyes round with shock. "And they didn't care."

The world blurred and darkened around him as exhaustion overtook him, but one thing remained clear: The rogues had sent a message, and the Clan was far from safe.

Chapter 15

Poppypool's heart pounded in her chest as she hurriedly gathered cobwebs and goldenrod from the herb store. Newtflake lay unconscious in the center of the medicine den, his fur matted with blood, his sides heaving with shallow, labored breaths. Cedarpelt, barely alive, was a mass of wounds, and every groan he made sent a sharp pang of dread through her.

"How did this happen?" Poppypool whispered to herself, her paws moving on instinct as she pressed cobwebs onto Newtflake's wounds. "How could they be so bold?"

The smell of blood filled the den, mingling with the bitter tang of herbs. Her paws trembled as she worked, trying to ignore the tightening feeling in her chest. The rogues weren't just a distant threat anymore– they were on GlacierClan's tail, attacking her apprentice, her Clanmates.

And she had no doubt who was behind this: Rowantail. The thought of her father twisted like a thorn in her mind. His smug face after the camp raid, his cruel threats. Was this his doing? Did he somehow send the rogues to punish her for denying him? For not killing Otterfire?

Poppypool pushed the thought aside, focusing instead on Newtflake's shallow breathing. She couldn't afford to lose him too, not him. "Hold on, Newtflake," she whispered. "Please, just hold on."

Outside, the camp buzzed with tension like a horde of bees. The news of the rogue attack had spread like greencough, and the Clan was on edge. Patrols were being sent out to fortify the borders, and warriors whispered anxiously amongst themselves. Daisystep... Daisystep still hadn't returned. She hadn't been found. Her heart felt like it was being squashed between two boulders.

Poppypool's fur prickled as she finished bandaging up Newtflake's wounds. He was stable– for now– but the fear of losing him gnawed

at her. She felt the familiar pang of guilt, wondering if Rowantail was pulling the strings. Would the rogues strike again?

She turned to Cedarpelt, who was barely conscious. His wounds were severe, and his breathing was shallow. Poppypool worked swiftly, but a sense of hopelessness crept in. She couldn't save them all, not while the Clan was still under seige from within.

Suddenly, a shadow fell over her.

"Poppypool."

Hawkflight's voice snapped her out of her frantic thoughts, and she looked up, her eyes meeting his. He stood in the entrance of the medicine den, his expression tense with concern, but there was a fire in his gaze– one that told her he wasn't here just to check on her.

"We need to talk."

"Now is a really bad time, Hawkflight," she muttered, her voice tight as she turned back to Cedarpelt, carefully pressing more moss on his more severe injuries.

"I know it's a bad time," Hawkflight replied, stepping forward. "But you've been avoiding me, and I can't–"

"I said it's a bad time!" Poppypool snapped, her tone sharper than she intended. "My apprentice is injured, Cedarpelt is dying, and Daisystep... she hasn't come back! I don't have time for this!"

Hawkflight recoiled at her harsh tone, his tail lashing once before he narrowed his eyes. "I get that you're upset, but I know something is wrong, and you've been keeping things from me for moons. I'm your brother, let me help–"

"You're not helping by barging in here!" Poppypool interrupted, her voice rising as she spun around to face him. "I can't deal with your accusations right now! Cedarpelt is dying, Hawkflight, and I'm trying to save him! I don't have time to entertain the same conversation we've been having for moons!"

Hawkflight's ears flattened, a flash of hurt crossing his face before it was quickly replaced by frustration. "I'm not accusing you of anything! I'm trying to–"

"I don't care what you're trying to do!" Poppypool snapped again, her voice shaking. "I need to focus on my patients, and you're distracting me! If you want to help, then get out of my den!"

Hawkflight's tail lashed again, and for a moment, it looked like he might argue. But then he let out a sharp breath and stepped back toward the entrance, his eyes still burning with frustration.

"Fine," he muttered, his voice cold. "But we're not done, you can't keep pushing me away." He turned and stormed out of the den, leaving Poppypool trembling with anger and guilt.

As soon as he was gone, she sank down beside Newtflake, her paws shaking as she tried to steady her breathing. She hated snapping at him–hated how everything seemed to be falling apart. But she couldn't deal with Hawkflight's suspicions right now, not when her apprentice was hurt and Cedarpelt's life hung in the air.

She had to keep it together, she couldn't afford to break down. Not yet.

*****

Poppypool didn't have time to dwell on the sting of guilt that Hawkflight's retreat left behind. Newtflake's breathing was still shallow, his fur matted and stained with blood despite all her efforts to clean his wounds. Cedarpelt's ragged gasps had grown weaker, and she knew he may not survive the night.

She closed her eyes for a brief moment, just long enough to center herself. She had to keep going. Newtflake, Cedarpelt, and the Clan were depending on her.

"Newtflake..." she whispered softly, brushing her nose against his cheek. "Please hold on."

Movement at the den pulled her attention away. It was Daisystep. Or rather, what was left of her.

Hawkflight, his fur bristled with grief and anger, helped carry Daisystep's lifeless body into the medicine den, her flank bloodied and torn from the rogue attack. Poppypool's breath caught in her throat, the weight of the moment hitting her like a stone.

Another warrior lost.

"Daisystep..." she breathed, her voice hoarse with sorrow. She fought to push back the despair, forcing herself to act. She had to treat the living. She couldn't let her emotions get in the way of doing her duty, no matter how much it hurt.

"I'll prepare her for her vigil later," Poppypool said quietly, though Hawkflight didn't respond.

Hawkflight said nothing as he laid Daisystep down beside Cedarpelt. He didn't look at Poppypool, his face a mask of pain and anger. The distance between them felt like a chasm she didn't know how to cross.

After a long stretch of silence, Hawkflight spoke, his voice trained but steady. "I'll be outside if you need me."

Poppypool nodded, not trust herself to speak. As Hawkflight padded out, she heard the soft rustle of pawsteps approaching. It was Sparrowstar.

The weakened leader's yellow eyes were filled with sorrow as she entered the den, her normally regal frame slumped under the weight of grief and stress of losing her lives. "How are they?" she asked softly, her gaze sweeping over the injured.

Poppypool swallowed hard, trying to keep her voice steady. "Newtflake is stable... for now. But Cedarpelt..." She shook her head, blinking back tears. "He very well may not survive the night. I'm doing what I can."

The leader closed her eyes for a moment, exhaling deeply. "We'll mourn them properly when the time comes. You've done everything you could, Poppypool."

"I could've done more..." she whispered, the guilt heavy in her

chest.

"No," Sparrowstar said firmly, stepping closer. "You've done all you could. Don't carry this weight alone."

Poppypool's eyes flicked to where Cedarpelt lay, his breaths weak and shallow. A pang of helplessness shot through her. Another death was looming over her, and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

"Let me know if you need anything," Sparrowstar said gently, before quietly leaving the den.

Poppypool stood frozen in place, staring at the scene around her. She felt like the weight of the entire Clan rested on her shoulders, and it was all slowly crumbling.

Newtflake stirred slightly, pulling her attention back. She knelt beside him, determined to at least save those she could tonight. With trembling paws, she adjusted the poultice on his side and checked his breathing again. It was shallow, but steady.

"You'll be okay, Newtflake," she whispered. "I promise."

But as the night stretched on, her mind couldn't shake the feeling that everything was slipping through her grasp. Daisystep was gone. Cedarpelt was fading. Newtflake was barely hanging on. And Hawkflight– her own brother– was slipping further away from her.

She felt so alone. Even the stars above were silent, their cold light offering no comfort.

Chapter 16

Poppypool sat beside Newtflake's nest, her eyes half-lidded his exhaustion. Her thoughts were muddled with grief and worry as the night dragged on. She couldn't stop thinking about the events of the day– the blood, the bodies, the lingering presence of death in the den.

Suddenly, Newtflake stirred. His eyes shot wide open, glazed with panic. "Daisystep! Cedarpelt!" he gasped, trying to sit up despite his injuries. The movement pulled on his wounds, causing him to wince, but his frantic energy overpowered the pain.

"Newtflake!" Poppypool rushed to his side, her voice gentle but firm as she pressed him back into his nest. "You need to stay still, you're hurt."

"Where are they?" he asked breathlessly, eyes darting around the den. "Where's Daisystep? Cedarpelt?"

Poppypool hesitated, her heart tightened in her chest as the weight of his question sank in. She looked into his eyes, seeing the raw fear and hope swirling there. Her throat felt thick, but she knew she couldn't keep the truth from him.

"Newtflake..." she began softly, pressing her paw to his side, trying to soothe him. "Daisystep... she didn't make it."

For a moment, Newtflake's gaze was blank, as though he hadn't heard her. Then the realization hit, and his entire body seemed to deflate. "No..." he whispered, his voice breaking. "No. She can't be... she can't be gone."

Poppypool's ears flattened against her head, the sadness in his voice cutting her like a thorn. "I'm so sorry," she murmured, her own grief bubbling just beneath the surface. "Cedarpelt... he's still with us, but he's... he's very weak. I'm not sure if he's going to make it."

Newtflake's breath quickened, his face contorted with pain. "Daisystep... Cedarpelt..." His voice trembled with disbelief, and he tried once again to push himself up. "I... I should've done something. I should've stopped them!" His claws flexed into the moss beneath his paws, trembling with fury and regret.

"No, Newtflake," Poppypool soothed, gently pressing him down once more. "You did everything you could. You got Cedarpelt back, you survived. That's more than enough. I'm so thankful you're awake."

But her words didn't seem to reach him. Newtflake's yellow-green eyes darkened with anger, his lip curling as a low growl rumbled in his throat. "The rogues... they'll pay for this. Every single one of them." His voice had shifted, the kindness and patience she was so used to replaced by something far more dangerous.

Poppypool blinked, taken aback by the sudden shift in his demeanor. Newtflake had always been gentle and thoughtful, never one to speak with such venom. Her heart ached seeing him like this– broken, hurting, and so consumed with vengeance.

"Newtflake, you need to rest," she said softly, trying to maintain a calm tone, though worry gnawed at her insides. "We'll talk about this later. Right now, you need to focus on healing."

But Newtflake's eyes were clouded with fury. "No, Poppypool. This can't go unpunished." His claws dug deeper into the ground, his body trembling. "Sparrowstar, Umberflame, Foggyrain, Rosefur, Hawkstreak, Daisystep...Cedarpelt... none of them deserved this."

"They didn't," Poppypool agreed, her voice laced with sorrow and guilt. "But fighting for revenge won't bring them back. It'll only hurt you more." She gently placed her paw on his, her touch firm but gentle. "Right now, you need to rest. Please, Newtflake."

For a moment, Newtflake's eyes softened, the storm inside him seeming to quiet at her words. He sank back into his nest, his breaths uneven as he closed his eyes. "I just... I can't believe she's gone," he murmured, his voice cracking as the reality of Daisystep's death washed over him.

"I know," Poppypool whispered, her heart breaking for him. She stayed by his side, watching as exhaustion finally claimed him again. His breathing slowed, and his body relaxed as he drifted into a fitful sleep.

But as Poppypool watched him, she couldn't shake the unease that had settled over her. The anger in his voice, the desire for revenge– it reminded her too much of the darkness that had taken root in her heart. She couldn't let that happen to Newtflake. She *wouldn't.*

As she sat beside him, her own thoughts swirled like leaves in a storm. The guilt over the attack still weighed heavily on her, even though she couldn't say it out loud. If she hadn't been involved with Rowantail, if she hadn't kept this terrible secret, would any of this have happened?

Would Daisystep and the others still be alive?

*****

As the stars began to glimmer in the darkening sky, the weight of the day pressed heavily on Poppypool's chest. The air inside the den was thick with the scent of herbs. The soft rasp of Cedarpelt's breathing filled the silence, each exhale rattling in his chest.

Poppypool watched him, her heart aching as his life teetered on the edge of StarClan's borders. His fur, once sleek and vibrant, was matted with blood, the deep gashes from the rogue attack were lethal and the blood loss was great, but she was trying everything to keep him alive.

The guilt gnawed at her like a rat, burrowing deeper with every heartbeat. *Is this my fault?* The question echoed in her mind relentlessly. *If I hadn't let Rowantail into my life... if I hadn't agreed to his demands... would Cedarpelt be lying here? Would Daisystep and the others still be alive?*

She glanced back at Newtflake, who was fast asleep in his nest, his face twisted in pain even in his dreams. His words from earlier, filled with anger and a thirst for revenge, replayed in her mind. She'd never seen him like that before. He was kind, gentle,

compassionate– traits she had always admired in him. But now, she feared the rogues had stolen that part of him.

Poppypool felt her throat tighten as a sob threatened to escape. She couldn't let him turn into something he wasn't. She couldn't let him fall into the darkness that had ensnared her. But how could she stop it, when she was the one who had led them all down this path?

She looked at Cedarpelt once more. His breaths were shallow, but she noted that they were slightly steadier. *I should confess...* The thought struck her with sudden clarity, but it brought with it a wave of of fear so overwhelming, she nearly choked on it. *If I step down as GlacierClan's medicine cat, if I tell them the truth... I'll lose everything.*

But then she remembered Hawkflight's words from their last confrontation. *"You're pushing everyone away. Keeping secrets. Acting like nothing's from when it's so obvious that it is."* He had seen right through her, as he always did. He had been hurt by her lies and distance. And even still, even now, he cared. He wanted to help her, but she kept shutting him out.

Should I tell him? She wondered, her heart pounding in her chest. *Should I finally tell him the truth? About Rowantail? About everything?* She could imagine his face– shock, betrayal, pain. But maybe, just maybe, he would understand. Maybe he would help her find a way out of this nightmare.

But that was a dangerous hope, one she wasn't sure she could afford.

She stood up, shaking out her tense limbs. The vigil for Daisystep was about to begin, and she knew she had to be there, even though her heart screamed for her to run, to hide away from the Clan and her responsibilities. As she padded toward the clearing, the air was heavy with mourning. Cats were gathered in solemn silence around Daisystep's body, her fur carefully groomed by the warriors who had loved and fought beside her.

Poppypool hesitated at the edge of the circle. She felt... detached, isolated. The grief she carried was too personal, too crushing to

share with someone else. She had lost more than just a Clanmate today– she had lost herself, piece by piece, to the choices she had made in secret.

She padded forward and took her place beside Daisystep's body, lowering her head in respect. But the words of prayer felt hollow on her tongue. The emotional burden on her shoulders grew heavier by the moment, and the stares of her Clanmates– whether imagined or real– seemed to pierce through her, filled with suspicion and unspoken questions.

As the vigil wore on, her mind drifted back to Newtflake. His vow for revenge gnawed at her, deepening her fear. *What if he falls into the same trap I did? What if I've already set him on a path he can't escape?* She couldn't bear the thought of him being consumed by the same darkness that haunted her every night.

She needed to do something– anything– to fix this. But she didn't know how. And with every passing moment, the path forward seemed to blur, the right choice slipping further out of reach.

The stars glittered coldly above her, as distant and silent as they had been for moons. Poppypool lifted her gaze, desperate for some kind of sign from StarClan– or that spirit she'd been visited by. Anything to show her they hadn't abandoned her completely. But the sky remained cold, unfeeling. And she was left alone with her guilt, her fear, and the weight of the secrets that threatened to crush her.

As the night deepened, so did her resolve. She couldn't let Newtflake fall into the same darkness that had claimed her. She couldn't let Hawkflight drift away from her entirely. Somehow, she would make things right. But she knew the way she would try would be hard.

*****

The quietness in the den was heavy, a stark contrast to the chaos of the recent days. Poppypool sat next to Cedarpelt's nest, her paw resting lightly on his flank as he took slow, shallow breaths. His fur was matted, but his body had finally begun to heal after days of

lingering on the edge of death. The tension in Poppypool's muscles loosened slightly as she saw his chest rise and fall in a steady rhythm. It was a miracle Cedarpelt had survived.

Newtflake, sitting close by, was trembling. The moment Cedarpelt had regained consciousness, he'd launched into a series of guilt-ridden apologies, his voice cracking with every word.

"I should've been more careful... I should've protected you better," Newtflake stammered, his eyes wide and glassy with tears. "If I had fought harder, if I'd been smarter, Daisystep might still be alive... I'm so sorry."

Cedarpelt, though weakened, shifted slightly in his nest, turning his gaze toward Newtflake. His voice, while hoarse, was gentle, a soft rasp as he spoke. "It's not your fault, Newtflake. You did everything you could to save me. If it weren't for you, I wouldn't even be here."

Poppypool, sitting quietly beside Cedarpelt, nodded in agreement. "He's right, Newtflake. The rogues attacked so suddenly, and you fought fiercely to bring Cedarpelt back. No one could have predicted what they'd do... and Daisystep... she fought bravely. But for now, you need to focus on recovering. Both of you do."

Her gaze flicked to Cedarpelt, who met her eyes and gave a small nod. "Once you're stronger, we'll avenge Daisystep's death, together. But not now. Now you both need to rest."

Cedarpelt shifted again, wincing slightly from the movement, but there was something else on his mind. He seemed hesitant for a moment before asking, "Poppypool... has Sparrowstar shown any signs of being sick?"

Poppypool blinked, surprised at the question. "Sick?" she echoed, a frown forming. "No, not that I've noticed. Why?"

Cedarpelt's eyes softened, his voice barely a whisper now. "We've been trying to have a litter of kits," he admitted, the faintest trace of hope and worry mingling in his tone. "I just... need to know if there's any sign."

Understanding dawned on Poppypool, and she felt a pang of sadness for the tom. He had been through so much, and the thought of a future litter, of something good, must have been one of the few things keeping him going. She offered him a reassuring smile.

"I'll examine her," she promised softly, "and if she's expecting, I'll let you know."

Cedarpelt let out a long sigh of relief, his tired eyes closing as he leaned his head back into the moss. "Thank you," he whispered, his voice fading as sleep overtook him. His body, once tense and pained, seemed to relax slightly as the weight of worry lifted from him.

Newtflake watched him for a moment, a frown pulling at his lips as he shifted his gaze to Poppypool. His eyes, still full of grief and anxiety, now focused on her. "Poppypool," he said softly, his voice careful but filled with concern, "are you doing okay?"

Poppypool blinked, surprised by the question. She hadn't expected Newtflake, still fresh out of danger himself, to be thinking about her at all. She stared at him for a long moment before letting out a small sigh.

"I'm better now that you're awake," she admitted, her voice low and tired but honest. "Seeing you like that... it was hard. But you're getting stronger, and that's what matters."

Newtflake's concerned expression didn't ease, but he nodded, clearly not satisfied but willing to let it go for the moment. "I'm just glad you're here. I don't know what I would've done without you and Cedarpelt."

Poppypool gave him a small, tired smile, though the weight on her heart remained. "You'll be okay, Newtflake. You're stronger than you think."

He nodded again, still troubled but slowly beginning to relax as exhaustion started to settle in. "Thank you... for everything."

With Cedarpelt sleeping soundly and Newtflake slowly succumbing

to rest, the den fell into silence. Poppypool watched her apprentice for a moment longer before rising to her paws. The quiet was heavy around her, pressing down on her shoulders as she moved silently toward the exit of the den.

Outside, the moon hung low in the sky, casting the camp in pale silver light. Poppypool looked up at the stars, her chest tight as she thought of all the burdens she had been carrying. Cedarpelt's near-death experience, Newtflake's guilt and vengeful words, and her own dark secrets about Rowantail, the father who haunted her in ways no other cat could imagine. The Clan was mourning Daisystep, but they didn't know the true weight of everything Poppypool carried.

As she turned her gaze back toward camp, her eyes landed on the body of Daisystep, laid out for her vigil. A fresh wave of guilt crashed over her. Daisystep's death felt like another wound added to her soul, one more crack in the facade she wore. She should have been there, should have done something more... but what?

The emotional weight grew heavier with every passing day. Newtflake's desire for vengeance weighed on her heart, making her worry about how he would recover from this loss. Cedarpelt's hope for kits with Sparrowstar stirred something inside her– a reminder of all the hopes and futures at risk, all because of the growing chaos on the moor.

And then there was her. The one with the most blood on her paws, whether the Clan knew it or not.

Poppypool sat down in the cool night air, her paws heavy as she contemplated the choices ahead. Could she ever find redemption? Could she ever lift the weight of her sins from her shoulders? And if she couldn't, how much longer would she be able to carry the weight alone?

Chapter 17

Poppypool led Hawkflight across the moor in silence, her steps heavy with anticipation. The crisp air was thick with unspoken words, and though she felt the weight of what she was about to reveal pressing down on her, she knew it had to be done. Hawkflight needed to know. He deserved the truth, no matter how much it would shatter everything between them.

When they were far enough away from the camp and any borders, Poppypool stopped. Her heart pounded in her chest, the blood rushing in her ears making it hard to focus. She turned to Hawkflight, how stood a few paces away, his expression suspicious yet patient. He had followed her willingly, though the tension between them had grown steadily since their last argument. Now, she was about to lay everything at his paws.

"Hawkflight," she began, her voice wavering slightly. "I... I need to tell you something. Everything, actually."

Hawkflight's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, 'everything'?"

Poppypool drew in a deep breath, feeling the weight of the words as they formed in her mouth. "About what I've done. About Rowantail... and the murders."

The confusion on Hawkflight's face quickly turned to disbelief, and then, as the realization set in, to rage. His fur bristled as he took a step toward her, his voice a sharp snarl. "What do you mean, 'murders'? What are you saying?"

She lowered her head, knowing the storm that was about to hit. "I've killed two cats," she whispered, her throat tight. "Darkeyes... and Stormfern. Rowantail forced me to, I-I didn't want to... but I did it."

The silence that followed was deafening. Hawkflight stared at her as though she had grown fangs, his eyes wide with fury and betrayal.

Then, all at once, his anger erupted.

"You killed *Stormfern?"* he spat, stepping forward, his teeth bared. "The deputy? *Darkeyes?"* His voice rose with every word, the disbelief and disgust thick in the air. "You– You murdererd them! You killed your Clanmates!"

Poppypool flinched, her heart shattering at the venom in his voice. She knew this was how he'd react, but it still pierced her like a thorn. His words cut deep, every syllable searing into her soul.

"Rowantail twisted me," she said quietly, staring down at her paws. "I didn't want to–"

"I don't care what *Rowantail* did!" Hawkflight snarled, his tail lashing furiously. "Tawnyheart did everything in her power to make sure Rowantail's influence never reached us! She suffered trying to keep him from us, and now look at you– look at what you have become!"

The accusation hit her like a blow. Tawnyheart's name hung in the air, heavy and painful. She had been the only thing standing between Rowantail and his kits. Her absence from their lives after growing up left them bitter and vulnerable... and now Poppypool had fallen into the very darkness their mother had fought so hard to protect them from.

"I know," Poppypool whispered, tears stinging her eyes. "I've become him, I know I have."

Hawkflight's fur was still bristling, his breath heavy with anger. He glared at her, as if seeing her for the first time– not as his sister, but as something corrupted. "You've stained your paws with blood," he hissed. "How could you do that? How could you betray the Clan like this?"

Poppypool met his gaze, her voice trembling. "I didn't want to. I've been trying to redeem myself, Hawkflight. I've been reaching out to StarClan, but they won't speak to me. I've been alone in the dark. The only spirit I've been able to talk to is this starry cat who says I can make things right, but I don't even know how."

"*Make things right*?" Hawkflight laughed bitterly, his eyes cold. "There's no making thing right, Poppypool. Not in the Clan's eyes. You're beyond redemption."

Her breath caught in her throat, and she looked at him with pleading eyes. "What about in your eyes?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

For a moment, Hawkflight hesitated. He opened his mouth to respond, but then closed it, his tail lashing in frustration. He turned his gaze away from her, his expression torn, but his anger still burning bright.

"I don't even know who you are anymore," he said coldly. "You're not the sister I remember. You're not the cat I thought I knew. All I see is blood on your paws."

Poppypool flinched again, the pain of his words digging deep into her heart. She wanted to argue, to tell him that she was still his sister, that she was still trying, but the truth felt hollow in the face of his fury.

Without another word, Hawkflight turned away from her, his tail lashing one last time as he stalked off across the moor. "You're on your own," he called over his shoulder, his voice sharp with finality. "Don't come to me for help, not after this."

Poppypool watched him go, her heart breaking all over again. She tried to call after him, but the words stuck in her throat. Tears welled in her eyes as she stood there, alone on the moor, her body shaking with the weight of his rejection.

"Hawkflight, please..." she whispered, her voice barely audible.

But he didn't turn back. He was gone, and with him, the last flicker of hope she'd been holding onto.

Poppypool sank to the ground, the cold earth beneath her trembling paws doing little to soothe the storm of guilt and sorrow that raged inside her. The sky above her darkened as clouds rolled in, covering the welcoming blueness that had been overhead before her

confession.

She had been right to expect Hawkflight's fury, but the reality of it was more devastating than she could have imagined. She had hoped that, despite everything, he might understand– might see the pain and struggle she'd been through– but he couldn't look past the blood on her paws. In his eyes, she was no better than Rowantail.

The weight of his words, of her actions, pressed down on her chest, suffocating her. She didn't know if she could bear it much longer.

*****

The den was quiet, the soft rustling of the vines outside the only sound as Poppypool worked through the motions. Her paws moved steadily, pressing along Sparrowstar's flank, feeling the warmth and gentle swell beneath her fur.

Pregnant.

It wasn't a surprise. Cedarpelt had been right, his instincts well-tuned as ever. But something about this moment felt heavier than it should. The excitement that usually accompanied such news felt tainted, like it couldn't break through the shadow hanging over her.

Poppypool tried to smile as she sat back. "Congratulations, Sparrowstar," she said softly, looking into the leader's eyes. "The first thing Cedarpelt asked me was if you were expecting."

For a heartbeat, there was no response. Sparrowstar simply watched her, yellow eyes unreadable. The usual warmth and strength that always seemed to radiate from her were absent. Poppypool waited for a smile, a laugh, some sign of joy– but none came.

The silence stretched on, the air between them thickening. Sparrowstar's gaze didn't waver, but the longer she stared, the more Poppypool's pulsed raced in her chest.

Does she know?

Poppypool swallowed, trying to keep her nerves at bay. *Does she know what I've done?*

The guilt churned in her stomach, rising with every moment that passed. Hawkflight had been so angry, his words still ringing in her ears. He could have told Sparrowstar. He could have told the Clan.

Her heart hammered against her ribs, each beat a painful thud of anxiety. *Maybe she already knows. Maybe she's waiting for me to admit it.*

Desperation clawed at her. She had to say something, break the tension before it swallowed her whole. "I... I should check on Newtflake and Cedarpelt," she blurted, her voice sounding far too loud in the quiet den. She stood, avoiding Sparrowstar's gaze now, and backed toward the entrance "They... they need me."

Still, Sparrowstar said nothing. Her silence was suffocating. Poppypool could feel the leader's eyes on her, even as she hurried out, her fur prickling with the weight of that gaze.

Outside, she breathed in the fresh air, but it didn't help. Her legs felt weak, her paws shaking as she hurried across camp toward the medicine den. The bright sun above did little to chase away the dark thoughts clouding her mind.

What if Hawkflight had told her? What if she knows everything?

The ground beneath her seemed to tilt as she walked, unsteady from the weight of her secrets. She couldn't shake the image of Sparrowstar's cold, silent eyes, drilling into her as if waiting for her to crack. Was this it? Was the truth about to come out?

She reached the medicine den and ducked inside, where the familiar scents of herbs greeted her, grounding her for a moment. Newtflake was busy, sorting through a newly-collected pile of herbs, and Cedarpelt lay resting in his nest nearby, his breathing steady.

For a moment, Poppypool let herself relax. They were safe, for now.

Newtflake turned his head, his eyes brightening when he saw her. "Poppypool! Did everything go well with Sparrowstar?"

Poppypool forced a nod, her mouth dry. "Yes... she's expecting."

Newtflake's face broke into a wide grin. "That's wonderful news! Cedarpelt will be overjoyed."

"Yes, he will," she murmured, though her mind was far from the joy of new kits. Her paws itched with the need to do something, anything to distract herself from the fear that gnawed at her insides. "I'll... I'll just check on Cedarpelt."

She moved toward the injured warrior, her steps slower now, more deliberate. Cedarpelt was sleeping peacefully, his sides rising and falling in a steady rhythm. Poppypool watched him for a moment, trying to focus on the warmth of life that radiated from him instead of the darkness swirling inside her.

Her thoughts flickered back to the moment with Sparrowstar. What had that look meant? Had it been suspicion? Anger? Or was she just imagining it, her guilty conscience playing tricks on her?

Her paws trembled as she turned away from Cedarpelt and found herself staring at the herb shelves, her gaze unfocused. She couldn't let the fear overwhelm her, not now. She had to keep going, had to stay strong.

"Poppypool?"

Newtflake's gentle voice pulled her from her thoughts. She turned to see him watching her, concern etched across his face. "Are you okay?"

Her throat tightened. She wanted to say no, to admit everything that had been weighing on her, but the words stuck in her throat. Instead, she gave him a weak smile. "I'll be okay," she whispered, though the words felt hollow.

She was anything but okay. And as much as she wanted to believe that she could keep going like this, the cracks were starting to show.

How much longer could she keep her secrets from him, from the Clan? Did Hawkflight tell Sparrowstar about what she told him? Would the weight of her guilt crush her entirely?

Chapter 18

Poppypool arrived at the Gathering alongside her Clanmates, slipping toward the medicine cats' area with a quiet sigh of relief. It was always a reprieve to be among those who understood her role, especially after the tumultuous moons. The scent of gathered Clans mingled in the hollow as she greeted the other medicine cats with brief, but warm nods. Her gaze quickly landed on Orchidfern, who watched her with concern, her mix-matched eyes flicking around her. *Looking for Newtflake.*

Poppypool padded over to her quietly, doing her best to seem composed, though the exhaustion from tending to her wounded apprentice, Cedarpelt, and the weight of Sparrowstar's non-response weighing heavily on her.

"Poppypool," Orchidfern's voice was quiet, her ears twitching with concern. "You look... tired."

Poppypool forced a small smile, her voice low so only Orchidfern could hear. "It's been a rough few days. Newtflake... he was attacked during an herb-gathering patrol."

Orchidfern's eyes widened, her fur bristling as she leaned in closer. "Attacked? What happened? Is he okay?"

"He's recovering back at camp," Poppypool reassured, though her voice wavered slightly. "It was close, Orchidfern. He saved Cedarpelt too, but Daisystep..." She trailed off, the words catching in her throat. "Daisystep didn't make it."

Orchidfern's eyes shone with sympathy, her stubby tail twitching as though she wanted to brush it against Poppypool's flank. "Oh, Poppypool, I'm so sorry. I had no idea things had gotten this bad. But Newtflake... he's really going to be okay?"

"Yes, he's stronger now," Poppypool said, trying to keep her voice steady, though the image of Newtflake's mangled form haunted her

mind. "I wouldn't be here if I wasn't sure. But... it's been hard."

Orchidfern's fur smoothed down slightly, though the worry in her eyes remained. "I can't believe the rogues would go after a medicine cat," she murmured, shaking her head. "Newtflake is so kind, always eager to help anyone. Who would do that?"

Poppypool swallowed hard, guilt prickling under her pelt. She couldn't tell Orchidfern the truth– about Rowantail, the Dark Forest, and how her own actions had played a part in this nightmare. Not yet, not now.

"He's strong," she said instead, pushing the guilt down. "I'll tell him you're thinking of him. He'd appreciate that."

Orchidfern's tail flicked in acknowledgement, though her gaze lingered on Poppypool's face. "And you? How are you holding up? You look like you haven't slept in days."

Poppypool hesitated, her mouth opening and closing as she tried to find the right words. How could she tell Orchidfern that sleep had become a battleground where she fought off the Dark Forest, that guilt gnawed at her even in her waking moments? "I'm managing," she said softly, though she could tell Orchidfern didn't believe her.

Orchidfern's eyes narrowed slightly, but she didn't press the issue. "I know you're strong, Poppypool, but... don't forget to take care of yourself. Newtflake needs you, your Clan needs you."

"I know," Poppypool whispered, a lump forming in her throat. "I'm doing my best."

Before Orchidfern could respond, the voices of the Clan leaders began to rise, and the attention shifted to the center of the Gathering Hollow as the announcements began. Poppypool gratefully turned her focus to the leaders, hoping to push her thoughts aside for the moment. OakClan and NightClan's leaders gave their updates about apprentices becoming warriors, new kits, and the potential retirement of a few cats. DawnClan spoke of good prey and strong patrols, leaving GlacierClan to be the last Clan to report.

Just as Poppypool began to relax, Sparrowstar rose to speak, her voice steady but filled with a heaviness that echoed in the words she spoke.

"I want to warn the Clans once more about the rogue group threatening the territories," Sparrowstar began, her gaze sweeping across the gathered cats. "GlacierClan's camp was attacked not long ago, and while our warriors fought bravely, some were injured, and we suffered several deaths."

Gasps and murmurs spread through the gathered cats. Poppypool's heart sank as she felt the eyes of every Clan turn to her and her Clanmates. Orchidfern brushed against her, a gesture of silent support.

Emberstar was the first to speak. "Our sympathies go out to GlacierClan," he said solemnly. "If there's anything we can do, please don't hesitate to ask."

The other leaders echoed his sentiments, offering words of support. Poppypool kept her head low, unable to meet their gazes. The losses of Umberflame, Rosefur, Foggyrain, and Hawkstreak still weighed heavily on her heart, and she felt the weight of every death pressing down on her.

As the Gathering drew to a close, Poppypool lingered behind with Orchidfern. The hollow was beginning to empty, but Orchidfern stayed close, her eyes filled with a deep understanding.

"Poppypool," she said gently, "you're not alone in this. Don't forget that."

Poppypool nodded, though her heart ached with the secrets she carried. As much as she wanted to believe Orchidfern's words, she knew the truth was far too heavy for anyone else to bear. Hawkflight's reaction had made that known.

*****

Poppypool paced in her den, her paws tracing the same path over and over, but her thoughts were a tangled mess. It had been days

since she'd last spoken to Hawkflight, and his cold distance gnawed at her heart like a thorn lodged too deep to remove. She had expected him to be angry– furious, even– but she hadn't realized how much it would hurt. The memory of their last argument still stung, his biting words echoing in her ears.

You're on your own. Don't come to me for help, not after this.

Poppypool let out a long, shaky breath, stopping her pacing to glance at Newtflake, who was curled up in his nest, sleeping soundly. His chest rose and fell steadily, but even in sleep, the lines of grief and tension were visible on his face. His desire for vengeance was growing by the day, and she didn't know how to stop it.

She quietly padded out of the den, the cool night air wrapping around her like a familiar embrace. The camp was still, the soft rustle of the wind breaking through the tall grass was the only sound. But there was an oppressive weight in the air, a tension that had been growing ever since the rogue attack. Every cat was on edge, wary of what might come next.

Hawkflight hadn't come to see her since their fight. She hadn't seen the familiar gleam in his yellow eyes, hadn't heard the comforting rumble of his voice. The absence was like a gaping hole in her heart, and yet, she couldn't blame him. She had brought this on herself. *My mistakes. My burdens.*

But it wasn't just Hawkflight she was avoiding. Poppypool knew she was isolating herself from the Clan. She had grown distant, even from Newtflake, who always seemed to look at her with concern these days. And now, with every secret she carried weighing heavier and heavier on her soul, she was beginning to feel like a stranger in her own camp.

Lost in though, she didn't notice Sparrowstar approaching her until the leader's sharp voice cut through the stillness.

"Poppypool."

The medicine cat jerked her head up, startled. "Sparrowstar," she

greeted, dipping her head out of habit, though her heart raced with a sudden surge of anxiety.

The GlacierClan leader regarded her with an unreadable expression, her piercing gaze making Poppypool feel exposed. For a heartbeat, Sparrowstar said nothing, just watching her. The silence stretched, and Poppypool's paws itched to move, to flee from the suffocating tension.

"How are things in the medicine den?" Sparrowstar finally asked, though her tone carried a weight that implied this was more than a casual inquiry.

Poppypool swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. "Newtflake is healing well. His wounds are mending, though... the emotional toll is harder to heal." She glanced at the leader, searching for any signs that Sparrowstar knew more than she was letting on. "Cedarpelt is stable, but it will take him time to regain his full strength."

Sparrowstar's tail twitched, her eyes narrowing ever so slightly. "And what of you?" she asked, voice calm but laced with something beneath the surface. "You've been... distant. Distracted."

Poppypool's breath caught in her throat. *Does she know? Had Hawkflight really told her?*

"I-I've been managing," Poppypool stammered, lowering her gaze to her paws. "There's been a lot to deal with."

"There has," Sparrowstar agreed, her voice hardening. "But your Clan needs you focused, Poppypool. Especially now, with the rogues becoming bolder. We can't afford for anyone to be distracted, least of all our head medicine cat."

Poppypool's heart raced. She felt as though the ground beneath her paws was crumbling. She couldn't tell if Sparrowstar was probing for the truth or simply concerned for her well-being. Either way, the pressure was unbearable.

"I understand," Poppypool replied quietly, forcing herself to meet Sparrowstar's gaze. "I won't let the Clan down."

Sparrowstar held her gaze for a long moment, her eyes sharp and unblinking. It felt like the leader could see right through her, see all the lies and secrets she had buried. But then, with a flick of her tail, Sparrowstar turned away.

"See that you don't," she said over her shoulder before padding off toward the leader's den.

Poppypool watched her go, her legs trembling beneath her. She felt as though she had just barely escaped something, though what exactly, she couldn't be sure. The unreadable look in Sparrowstar's eyes still lingered in her mind. Did she know? Was Hawkflight confiding in her? The uncertainty gnawed at her insides.

She stood frozen for several moments, her mind racing in a thousand different directions. The weight of everything pressed down on her– her mistakes, her guilt, Hawkflight's anger, Sparrowstar's suspicion– it was suffocating.

A quiet rustling behind her drew her attention, and she turned to see Newtflake emerging from the medicine den. His steps were slow, his body still clearly weak from his injuries, but his eyes were alert, searching.

"Poppypool?" he called out, his voice thick with exhaustion.

She hurried over to him, concern etching her face. "Newtflake, you should be resting."

He sighed, giving her a weak smile. "I can't sleep for long. I keep seeing... I keep hearing the rogues." His voice faltered, and his expression darkened with bitterness. "I just want to be useful again. I need to help the Clan."

Poppypool's heart ached at the sight of him, knowing how much pain he was carrying. She brushed her tail gently over his shoulder. "You've done more than enough. You need time to heal."

Newtflake's eyes clouded, and he hesitated before asking, "What about you? Are you doing okay?"

Her breath hitched. She wasn't sure how to answer that question.

Every part of her wanted to tell him the truth, to unload the burden she had been carrying for so long. But what good would it do to tell him? Would it help anything? Would it fix the chaos that had already been set in motion?

She forced a smile. "I'll be fine, Newtflake. You just focus on getting better. That's what matters."

He studied her for a moment, his brow furrowing with concern, but before he could say anything further, she nudged him gently back toward his nest.

"Get some rest. I'll be here if you need anything."

Relucantly, Newtflake nodded and settled back into his nest, though his eyes remained troubled as he glanced at her one last time before closing them.

As the camp quieted down and the stars twinkled faintly above, Poppypool felt more alone than ever. Every choice she made seemed to pull her deeper into the darkness, and with Hawkflight's distance, Sparrowstar's suspicion, and Newtflake's pain, she wasn't sure how much longer she could carry the weight.

And for the first time, she wondered if redemption was even possible for someone like her.

Chapter 19

Poppypool stirred as the first light of dawn filtered through the cracks of the medicine den's walls. She blinked, groggy and disoriented, but the sound of restless movement nearby quickly pulled her into full awareness. Newtflake was pacing, his tail twitching, eyes narrowed in thought.

"Newtflake?" she asked, her voice soft with concern. He had been this way for days- ever since the attack. The fire of vengeance burned in his yellow-green eyes, a simmering anger that had begun to harden him, and Poppypool feared what it could do to him in the long run.

"They have to pay," he muttered under his breath, his voice tight. "Those rogues- what they did to Daisystep, to Cedarpelt- I can't just sit here while they get away with it."

Poppypool sighed, her heart aching at his words. She padded over and touched her nose gently to his shoulder, hoping to calm him. "You're still recovering," she reminded him. "Your wounds aren't fully healed, and revenge won't bring Daisystep back."

Newtflake stopped and looked at her with a hardness she'd never seen before. "I can't rest while they're out there, waiting to strike again. I don't care if I'm injured. The next time those rogues show their faces, I'll be ready."

His determination was fierce, but it scared her. This wasn't the Newtflake she knew- the gentle, warm-hearted apprentice who had always put others before himself. The attack had changed him, and now she was watching the shift in him happen before her eyes.

"You won't help anyone by getting yourself killed," Poppypool warned, her voice firm but laced with emotion. "I need you, Newtflake. GlacierClan needs you. *Orchidfern* needs you. Daisystep wouldn't want you to throw your life away for revenge."

Newtflake flinched at her words but said nothing, his gaze drifting to the entrance of the den, as if already imagining the rogues lurking beyond the camp.

As Poppypool turned to check her herb stores, a sudden chill swept through the den. It was as if all the warmth had been sucked out, leaving only a biting cold in its wake. Poppypool froze, recognizing the feeling. Slowly, she turned around, her eyes widening as a faint shimmer of light began to coalesce at the edge of the den.

The spirit had returned.

The starry spirit had visited her her a few times before, always delivering cryptic messages and warnings, but today there was something different about their expression. Their luminous eyes were soft but solemn, and they looked straight at Poppypool.

"You must be careful," they murmured, their voice a low hum that seemed to echo in the space between the living and dead. "His heart is clouded with anger. If he follows the path he is on now, it will lead him to a place darker than you can imagine."

Poppypool's chest tightened. "I've been trying to guide him," she whispered, her voice trembling. "But I don't know what else to do. The rogues have taken so much from him... from us."

Their gaze didn't waver. "It is not the rogues that will destroy him- it is the thirst for vengeance. You know this, Poppypool. You have walked that line yourself."

The words hit her hard, like claws sinking into her heart. She bowed her head, her guilt overwhelming. The spirit was right- she had walked this dark path herself, had made choices she regretted, and now she was watching Newtflake teeter dangerously close to that same edge.

"Please," she whispered. "Help me save him."

The spirit stepped closer, their starry form flickering slightly. "Guide him, as you once wished someone had guided you. His heart is still pure, but it is being clouded by grief and rage. You must help him

before it is too late."

Before Poppypool could respond, the spirit faded away, leaving the medicine den cold and still once more. Poppypool stood there, staring at the empty space where the spirit had been, her heart heavy with both hope and fear.

Would she be able to save Newtflake from the darkness she knew so well?

*****

Later that day, as the sun began its descent, the mood in GlacierClan's camp grew even more tense. The threat of the rogue group weighed heavily on every cat's mind, especially as a few rogue sightings had been reported soon after Newtflake's attack. Patrols had been doubled, and the warriors walked with unease, always alert for signs of an impending attack. The last raid had been devastating, and the losses were fresh wounds for all of them.

Poppypool found herself preoccupied, thoughts racing as she tried to balance her duties with the rising fear in her heart. Newtflake's determination for vengeance were festering, and the rogue attacks were becoming bolder. She could feel the storm brewing, and it terrified her.

Just as she was preparing to check on Sparrowstar, Hawkflight approached her, his gaze troubled. But before he could speak, Poppypool felt a tap on her shoulder.

"Poppypool, I need to speak with you privately," Sparrowstar's voice was firm, but there was a flicker of something in her eyes that Poppypool couldn't place.

The two cats walked to the leader's den, leaving Hawkflight standing there, his own words swallowed by the urgency in Sparrowstar's tone.

Once inside, Poppypool turned to face her leader. "What's going on?" she asked, her stomach twisting with unease.

Sparrowstar hesitated, which only made Poppypool's anxiety grow.

"It's Tawnyheart," Sparrowstar said, her eyes flickering with something close to worry. "I've just found out... she's expecting a litter."

Poppypool blinked, taken aback. "Tawnyheart? But... I didn't even know-" She broke off, stunned at the news. Tawnyheart, distant and seemingly lost in her own world for moons, was expecting kits?

Sparrowstar's gaze was unreadable. "She's been distant, but this... I don't know. Something feels wrong. She won't talk to anyone, not even her new mate."

Poppypool's heart raced as the weight of everything of everything came crashing down. Between Newtflake's anger, the rogue threat, and now this new revelation about Tawnyheart, she felt like she was drowning.

"I'll check on her," Poppypool promised, her mind spinning. "But... her new mate?" she added, still reeling from the shock.

Sparrowstar nodded. "It's someone from outside the Clan. But... you've been distant yourself, Poppypool. You haven't been paying attention."

The words stung more than she expected. She had been so wrapped up in her own guilt, her secrets, that she hadn't noticed the changes around her. How could she have missed something so significant?

*****

That night, as Poppypool lay awake in her nest, the camp quiet around her, she felt the full weight of everything she had been carrying. The burden of her secrets, Newtflake's growing obsession with vengeance, the threat of the rogues, and now Tawnyheart's unexpected news.

She was overwhelmed- drowning in it all.

But as she stared up at the sky, her thoughts kept returning to the spirit's warning. She couldn't let Newtflake fall into the darkness. She couldn't lose him to the same path she had once followed.

And yet, she didn't know how to save him.

Chapter 20

The morning sun cast a pale light over the moorlands, the crisp scent of dew lingering in the air. Poppypool padded through the grass, her eyes scanning for herbs, but her mind was elsewhere. The tension in the camp was suffocating, with every cat on edge from Newtflake's attack. Sparrowstar's warning at teh Gathering had only heightened the unease, and now every warrior patrolling seemed more focused on spotting enemies than the duties of everyday life.

Behind her, four warriors, Pikedive, Nettlefoot, Sorrelfur, and Ivorywhisker, followed at a distance, their gazes sharp and their bodies tense. The four had insisted on accompanying her today, all unwilling to allow the medicine cat to roam without an escort after the camp raid and Newtflake's attack.

Pikedive grumbled under his breath. "Can't believe we're out here picking plants when the rogues are lurking around."

Sorrelfur's tail flicked in agreement. "They'll be back, I can feel it. Shouldn't we be focused on fortifying the camp instead of wandering this far out?"

Popypool kept her focus on the ground, unwilling to engage in their conversation. She knew they were right in a way- the rogues could strike at any moment- but the Clan's supplies were low, and if another battle broke out, they'd need far more herbs than they had now.

As she knelt to gather a bundle of broom, the sound of a twig snapping echoed through the quiet clearing. Instantly, all four warriors bristled, their claws sliding out as they darted toward the sound.

Poppypool froze, her heart racing. She slowly turned, expecting to see a rogue ready to attack, but instead, she saw a small, ragged cat at the edge of the clearing. The young rogue was trembling, their thin body riddled with dirt and a few half-healed wounds.

Pikedive bared his teeth. "Another rogue!" he hissed, stepping forward aggressively. "You've got some nerve showing your face here!"

"No!" Poppypool's voice cut through the tension as she moved between Pikedive and the rogue. The cat- barely more than an apprentice- flinched at the warrior's hostility, backing away with wide, fearful amber eyes.

"Get out of the way, Poppypool!" Nettlefoot growled. "We should drive them off before they cause more trouble."

Poppypool turned to face the rogue, her voice soft but firm. "Who are you?" she asked, her eyes studying the young cat. "What are you doing here?"

The rogue's eyes flicked nervously between the warriors and Poppypool. They swallowed, their voice shaky. "I'm... I'm Dusk," they whispered, barely loud enough to hear. "I... I didn't hurt anyone during the raid, I swear. I ran... I was too scared to fight."

Poppypool blinked, surprised by the admission. This was no hardened rogue warrior- this was a frightened, skittish cat who looked more terrified of her Clanmates than ready to fight them. She glanced down, noticing fresh wounds on Dusk's legs and flank, likely from the escape during the raid.

"You were with the rogues?" Nettlefoot snarled, taking a menacing step forward. "And now you think you can just slink back here? Your group killed my brother and sister!"

Dusk flinched and pressed themselves against the ground, their entire body trembling. "I-I didn't think they'd kill anyone," they whimpered. "I don't want to hurt anyone. Please... I'm just trying to survive."

Poppypool's heart clenched. She could see the fear in Dusk's eyes, and the pain from their injuries. This cat was no threat- they were a victim of the rogues' violence, too.

"The four of you, stand down," she ordered, her voice leaving no

room for argument. The four warriors hesitated, exchanging glances between each other before reluctantly stepping back.

Poppypool knelt down beside Dusk, speaking gently. "You're hurt, let me help you."

Dusk's eyes widened in disbelief, as if they couldn't understand why the Clan's medicine cat would offer them kindness. "You... you want to help me?"

"Of course," Poppypool said softly. "I'm a healer. It's my duty to help all cats in need."

Pikedive's tail lashed behind him. "We can't trust a rogue, Poppypool! You know that. What if this is a trap?"

"It's not," Poppypool said firmly. "Look at them. They're terrified. They didn't attack us- they need help."

Nettlefoot growled low in his throat. "And what will you do? Take them back to the camp? You want to walk in there with a rogue at your side?"

Poppypool straightened, her eyes sharp. "Yes. I'm taking Dusk back to camp, and they're going to get the treatment they need." She turned to Dusk, her voice soft again. "Come with me. You'll be safe in GlacierClan."

Dusk hesitated, clearly unsure, but eventually gave a small nod. As they stood, wincing from their injuries, Poppypool gestured for the young rogue to follow her. Pikedive and Sorrelfur watched with narrowed eyes, their hostility clear, but they said nothing more.

The walk back to the camp was tense, the silence heavy with unspoken words. Poppypool kept glancing over at Dusk, noticing how the rogue's eyes darted nervously around, as if expecting an attack at any moment. Every time their gaze landed on one of the warriors, they flinched.

When the camp came into view, Dusk slowed, their fear intensifying. "I... I don't think I should-"

"You'll be safe," Poppypool reassured them. "Trust me."

As they entered the camp, the Clan cats quickly took notice. Whispers broke out among the gathered cats, and all eyes turned to the small rogue trailing behind the medicine cat. Poppypool could feel their suspicion and anger, but she held her head high, leading Dusk toward the medicine den.

"What is this?" A sharp voice called out. Poppypool turned to see Sparrowstar stalking toward them, her eyes flashing with alarm. "Why is there a rogue in our camp?"

"Sparrowstar, this is Dusk," Poppypool explained quickly, stepping in front of the young rogue. "They're injured, and I'm treating them."

"Are you out of your mind?" Sparrowstar's voice was low but full of fury. "We've just been attacked, and you bring one of *them* into our camp?"

"Dusk didn't hurt anyone in the raid. They ran before the fighting started," Poppypool said firmly. "They need help, not more violence."

Sparrowstar's tail lashed behind her. "How do you know they aren't spying for the rogue group?"

"I don't," Poppypool admitted. "But I know they're injured, and it's my duty as a medicine cat to help them."

The tension in the camp was palpable as more cats gathered, murmuring angrily amongst themselves. But Poppypool stood her ground, her heart hammering in her chest.

"Let me do my job, Sparrowstar," she said quietly but resolutely. "Dusk isnt' a threat, they're just scared."

Sparrowstar eyed her for a long moment before turning her gaze to the trembling rogue. Finally, she flicked her tail with an irritated sigh. "Fine. But if they cause trouble, it's on you, Poppypool."

Poppypool nodded gratefully, quickly guiding Dusk into the safety

of the medicine den. Once inside, she could see the relief in the rogue's eyes as they sank down onto a nest of moss, their body sagging with exhaustion.

"Thank you," Dusk whispered, their voice small and full of disbelief.

Poppypool smiled gently as she began preparing herbs to treat their wounds. "You don't have to thank me. You're safe now."

But even as she spoke those words, Poppypool couldn't shake the unease creeping through her fur. The rogues were becoming an incredibly dangerous threat, and bringing one into the heart of the camp was a risk she wasn't sure she could afford.

And yet, she couldn't turn Dusk away, not when she saw the fear and pain in their eyes. But what would the rest of the Clan think?

What would Newtflake think?

Chapter 21

The air was tense, thick with barely concealed rage. Newtflake stood rigid at the entrance to the medicine den, his eyes narrowed and fiery as they locked onto Dusk, who cowered in their nest. Poppypool could feel the tension simmering between her apprentice and the young rogue, but she remained rooted to the spot, standing as a barrier between them.

"Are you out of your mind, Poppypool?" Newtflake's voice was low and venomous, each word a barely contained snarl. His claws dug into the dirt, his tail lashing behind him in sharp, angry flicks. "You brought a rogue into our camp? After *everything* they've done?"

Poppypool glanced over her shoulder at Dusk, whose wide, terrified eyes darted between them. The young rogue was clearly injured, their paws trembling and tail tucked under their body in fear. Barely older than an apprentice, the young cat was in no shape to be cast out alone to survive by themselves.

"They're just a kit, Newtflake," Poppypool said softly, though her tone carried the weight of her determination. "They didn't hurt anyone in the raid. They ran."

Newtflake's eyes blazed with fury. "That doesn't matter! They're one of *them*! The ones who killed Daisystep, who almost killed Cedarpelt–" His voice broke for a moment before it was laced with pure anger again. "And now you've brought them here like a sick, helpless kit? You're out of your mind!"

Poppypool felt her heart tighten at his words, but she refused to back down. "This isn't about vengeance, Newtflake. They're injured, they need help, and I'm not going to let a cat die just because of who they were born around." She held his gaze, her tone sharp now. "That's not what a medicine cat does."

Newtflake's breath hitched, and for a moment, she thought he might lash out at her. But he didn't. Instead, he turned his venom on Dusk.

"The warriors should've finished you off the second you stepped onto the battlefield." He spat at the young rogue's paws. "You don't belong here. You'll *never* belong here."

Dusk recoiled, pressing further into the nest, shivering under Newtflake's fury. Poppypool's chest clenched with guilt and protectiveness. She stepped fully between them now, her body shielding Dusk from Newtflake's view.

"That's enough, Newtflake," Poppypool said, her voice steady but filled with warning. "You're upset, and I understand that, but this isn't helping anyone. Go for a walk, clear your head."

Newtflake's expression twisted in disbelief and hurt. "You're choosing a rogue over your own Clanmate? Over *me*?"

Poppypool shook her head gently, trying to ease the tension in her voice. "No, I'm trying to keep you from doing something you'll regret." She met his eyes with quiet intensity. "Please, just go. Cool off."

For a long moment, Newtflake stared at her, his chest heaving with pent-up frustration. His claws sank further into the dirt, his lips curling slightly as though he was battling the urge to say something truly cruel. Finally, he whipped around with a snarl. "Feather-brained," he muttered darkly, storming out of the den and into the camp, his tail lashing wildly behind him.

Poppypool closed her eyes and sighed deeply. She knew this wouldn't be the end of Newtflake's anger, but she couldn't let that cloud her judgement. When she turned back to Dusk, she could see the rogue trembling, eyes full of unshed tears.

"I–I didn't mean to cause trouble," Dusk whispered, their voice shaking. "I just... I didn't want to hurt anyone."

Poppypool gave them a soft, reassuring look. "I know," she said gently, crouching down to examine their wounds. "I'm not going to let anyone hurt you, but you have to trust me and do exactly as I say."

Dusk nodded weakly, clearly terrified but too exhausted to argue. Poppypool worked quietly, applying poultices to their injuries, cleaning their wounds, and wrapping their leg where the injury seemed more severe. All the while, her thoughts were with Newtflake and how broken he looked when he left. The rage in his eyes wasn't just about Dusk– it was everything. The attack, Daisystep's death, Cedarpelt's brush with death. It was all consuming him, and now he was lashing out in the worst way.

When she was finished, she gave Dusk a small nod. "Rest," she said softly. "You're safe here. I'll make sure of it."

Dusk's eyes were wide with uncertainty, but they managed a weak nod and curled up in the nest. They were asleep within moments, their body finally giving in to the exhaustion of fear and injury.

Poppypool sat there for a while, her mind racing. She wondered how much longer she could keep up the balancing act– between the growing threat of the rogues, her own guilt, and now, Newtflake's unrelenting thirst for revenge.

As the evening shadows stretched longer, her thoughts wandered elsewhere. How much did the rogue leader know about her? About her father? If Rowantail sent the rogues to attack GlacierClan, would he also send them to attack the other Clans? Her chest tightened at the possibility. *Could this be the fall of GlacierClan?*

*****

Poppypool's heart pounded in her chest as she padded up to Sparrowstar's den. She had been summoned by the leader with no explanation, but the tension in the camp had been palpable ever since Dusk was brought in. Newtflake's angry stare lingered in her mind, and the weight of her own choices made her fur prickle with unease. She tried to calm herself as she approached the den, but every step felt like the ground was falling out from beneath her.

When she entered the den, Sparrowstar was already waiting, her yellow eyes sharp and unreadable. She was sitting tall, her tail wrapped tightly around her paws, but there was no warmth in her gaze. It was as cold as the winds that blew across the moorlands.

"Poppypool," Sparrowstar's voice was controlled, but there was an edge to it that sent a shiver down Poppypool's spine. "We need to talk."

Poppypool nodded, forcing herself to sit down, her paws trembling. "Of course, Sparrowstar."

The leader's eyes narrowed, her gaze never leaving Poppypool. "Hawkflight came to me two sunrises ago," she began, her words deliberate and slow, "the night you brought the rogue into our camp."

Poppypool's blood ran cold. She swallowed hard, but her mouth had gone dry. Hawkflight had told her. He'd told her everything.

Sparrowstar continued, her voice growing sharper. "He told me everything, Poppypool. About Rowantail. About Darkeyes and Stormfern, about your connection with the rogues. About your role in everything." Her eyes flared with fury as she leaned forward, her voice dropping to a growl. "And I want to know if it's true."

Poppypool's ears flattened against her skull. Her throat tightened, and she stammered, struggling to form words. "S-Sparrowstar, I...I never wanted any of this to happen. I swear, I didn't know it would go this far. I didn't–"

"Stop." Sparrowstar's voice cut through her rambling like a claw. Poppypool froze, staring at her leader with wide, frightened eyes. The fury in Sparrowstar's gaze was unmistakable now. "So it's true. Everything he said was true."

Poppypool's breath hitched. The full weight of it all crashed down on her in that moment. She felt small, like a kit caught doing something horribly wrong. Her heart pounded, her mind racing as she tried to think of a way to explain herself, to make Sparrowstar understand that she never meant for things to get this bad. But there was no way out.

"I'm so sorry," Poppypool whispered, her voice breaking as she dipped her head. "I never wanted to betray the Clan. I thought I could stop it, that I could fix it, but... I didn't know this would

happen. I didn't know Rowantail would–"

Sparrowstar's tail lashed, her patience frayed. "Enough, Poppypool." Her voice was like ice now, freezing the words on Poppypool's tongue. "You should have come to me. You should have told me *everything* from the beginning, but instead, you kept secrets, you made choices you can't take back down, and now you've put your Clan in danger and we've lost warriors because of *you*."

Poppypool flinched at her leader's words. Her mind flashed to the cats that had died: Darkeyes, Stormfern, Umberflame, Rosefur, Foggyrain, Hawkstreak– all dead because of her. Daisystep's death, Cedarpelt's brush with death, Newtflake's injuries– it was all her fault. The guilt was unbearable.

"I'm sorry," Poppypool whispered again, tears welling in her eyes. "I'll do anything to make it right. I'll never betray the Clan ever again."

Sparrowstar's gaze remained hard and unyielding. For a long, heavy moment, the leader was silent, as though weighing something. Poppypool's heart raced in the deafening quiet. Then, Sparrowstar's voice broke through again, but this time, it was colder than ever.

"The Clan is in a fragile state right now, Poppypool," Sparrowstar said, her tone dripping with disappointment. "We've lost too many good cats, and I can't afford to lose another medicine cat right now." She paused, her yellow eyes blazing as she leaned forward, her words sharp as claws. "So here's your choice: Leave the Clan, or prove your loyalty by helping us get rid of the rogues once and for all."

Poppypool's heart sank. The ultimatum hit her like a stone. Leave? She couldn't leave. GlacierClan was her home, her family. But to stay, she would have to help with the rogues– the very rogues she had unintentionally empowered. She swallowed hard, her throat tight with emotion, and nodded, her voice shaky but filled with determination.

"I'll do it," Poppypool said quickly. "I'll help. I swear, I'll never betray the Clan again, Sparrowstar. Please, just give me a chance."

Sparrowstar's eyes burned into her, as if searching for something–some flicker of sincerity, or maybe just desperation. Whatever it was, the leader didn't give any indication of what she saw. She simply flicked her tail, her expression cold and unreadable.

"Very well," Sparrowstar said, her tone clipped. "But if you fail us again, Poppypool, if there's even a hint of betrayal, you won't get another chance." She stood up, her towering form casting a shadow over the smaller she-cat. "Now go. And prove yourself."

Poppypool dipped her head, her heart thundering in her chest. "Thank you, Sparrowstar. I won't let you down."

Sparrowstar didn't respond. She simply flicked her tail in dismissal, her gaze never leaving Poppypool's as the medicine cat backed out of the den. Once outside, Poppypool took a deep breath, her chest tight with fear and anxiety. She had narrowly avoided exile, but the weight of Sparrowstar's ultimatum sat heavily on her shoulders. As she padded toward her den, her thoughts raced. She had to prove her loyalty. She had to make things right.

But deep down, she wondered if she could ever undo the damage she'd caused.

Chapter 22

The sun had begun its slow descent, casting a soft golden hue over the GlacierClan camp as Poppypool finished binding the last of Talonclaw's wounds. The gash along his shoulder had been deep, but with the proper herbs, it would heal cleanly. As her paws worked, her mind was elsewhere– on the rogues, on Dusk, huddled timidly in the medicine den, on Newtflake, and on Sparrowstar.

"There. Try to rest, Talonclaw," she murmured, her attention on half on the warrior as she secured the final wrap of cobwebs. The tension in the air was thick, and as she stepped back, she could feel the weight of the Clan's mistrust in Dusk.

Talonclaw stood, his muscles stiff from the fight. His eyes, sharp and suspicious, darted toward the far corner of the medicine den where Dusk lay, half-buried in moss and bracken, barely moving. The rogue's amber eyes followed the warrior's every move, wide with fear and uncertainty.

"That rogue shouldn't be here," Talonclaw growled, his tail flicking with irritation. His voice was low, but the anger in it was unmistakable. "They should be driven off the territory, not sitting in our camp. Especially not after what their group did."

Poppypool stiffened at the accusation, feeling the heat of her own irritation flare up, but she kept her tone even. "Dusk is injured and scared, Talonclaw. They didn't fight during the raid. They're barely a cat at all, just a kit caught up in something they never asked for."

Petalfire, who had been lying nearby, rose to her paws, hissing under her breath. "Barely a cat? They're still one of them. And the next time those rogues come, don't be surprised if that one's the first to slit your throat."

"That's enough," Poppypool snapped, stepping between the injured warriors and Dusk. She was tired, her mind and body worn thin from the relentless pressure of her role, but she wouldn't let the fear

and anger fester in her den. "You're here to heal, not to point claws at an innocent cat."

"Innocent?" Talonclaw spat. "You're taking their side over your own Clan?"

Poppypool's fur bristled, her voice growing sharper. "I'm a medicine cat. My role is to treat the injured and protect lives. Right now, Dusk is under my care, just like both of you. If you can't respect that, you're free to leave and seek treatment elsewhere."

Talonclaw and Petalfire shared a glance, muttering under their breath, but neither warrior had the energy or will to argue further. Talonclaw gave one last glance toward Dusk before turning and padding out of the den, Petalfire following close behind.

Once they were gone, Poppypool's shoulders slumped slightly, the weight of her authority weighing heavily on her. She turned back to Dusk, who was trembling, their small frame huddled tightly into the moss nest. Their wide amber eyes shimmered with fear, watching her as if they expected her to change her mind at any moment.

Poppypool softened her gaze, approaching Dusk with slow, careful steps. "Are you alright?" she asked gently, settling down beside the young rogue. She could see the tension in their body, the way their tail wrapped protectively around themselves, and it tugged at her heart.

Dusk didn't answer immediately. Their ears twitched, and their eyes flicked toward the entrance of the den where Talonclaw and Petalfire had exited. After what felt like an eternity of silence, they finally spoke, their voice soft and trembling. "Why did you bring me here?" they whispered. "Why did you take pity on me?"

The question was so simple, yet it hit Poppypool hard, cutting through her like a sharpened claw. She stared at Dusk, seeing the pain and confusion etched on their face. For a moment, she hesitated, unsure how to answer.

But then, her heart ached with the truth that she had been avoiding. She couldn't pretend anymore, not to herself, and certainly not to

this young cat who had been thrown into a life they never asked for.

"You and I..." she began slowly, her voice barely above a whisper, "we're not as different as you might think." She looked down at her paws, the familiar weight of guilt settling in her chest. "I know what it's like to grow up under the shadow of someone who... who was supposed to protect me but ended up doing more harm than good."

Dusk blinked, their ears flicking in disbelief. "But you're a medicine cat," they said, their voice small but tinged with confusion. "You're supposed to be... good."

Poppypool let out a soft, bitter laugh. "It's not that simple. I've made mistakes... horrible ones. I'm still trying to make it right." She glanced at Dusk, her eyes filled with a sadness that went beyond her role as a healer. "I saw that in you. I saw someone who didn't want to be part of that raid, someone who ran because they didn't want to hurt anyone."

Dusk's eyes widened, and they shook their head, their voice breaking. "I didn't want to... I didn't want to hurt anyone."

"I know," Poppypool whispered, her gaze soft but firm. "And that's why I brought you here. Because I believe you deserve a chance to be better than the cats who tried to shape you into something dark."

For a moment, Dusk was silent, their body trembling with a mixture of relief and disbelief. They looked up at Poppypool, their eyes shimmering with tears. "But... what if they come for me? What if they find out I'm here?"

Poppypool's expression hardened, a flicker of protectiveness rising in her chest. "Then we'll deal with it when the time comes. But right now, you're safe. GlacierClan will protect you as long as you want to stay."

Dusk's small frame trembled, and they buried their face into their paws, overwhelmed by the medicine cat's words. Poppypool watched, her heart heavy with the knowledge that they both carried burdens far too large for their young lives. She sighed softly,

knowing that bringing Dusk here would only complicate things further with the Clan. But she couldn't let that stop her. Dusk deserved a chance– just as much as she did.

She glanced back toward the entrance of the den, the cold evening air brushing against her fur. The tension within the camp was rising, and the rogue attacks were getting more and more frequent. But as long as Dusk was here, she wouldn't let fear dictate her actions.

And maybe, in helping Dusk, she could begin to find her own redemption.

*****

Poppypool's legs felt like they were sinking into the cold, damp ground that was covered by the layer of muddy, bloodied water as she moved through the shadowy forest. The gnarled branches of ancient trees twisted above her like claws reaching for her pelt. The familiar scent of decay and blood hung thick in the air, and the dense fog seemed to close in around her with every step. She knew this place– the Dark Forest. Her heart pounded, but she forced herself to keep walking. She was no stranger to this sinister realm, but tonight, there was a heaviness in the air, something darker than usual.

Ahead of her, three shapes emerged from the mist, their outlines barely visible at first. But Poppypool recognized them instantly. The spirit-cat stood in the center, their starry pelt a stark contrast against the oppressive gloom. Beside them, Stormfern– her once-fierce eyes now cold as ice– and Darkeyes, her steady, unreadable gaze fixed on Poppypool. The sight of them, especially together, sent a shudder down Poppypool's spine.

She froze. Guilt washed over her like a wave, drowning out her thoughts, leaving her tongue tied in knots. For a moment, all she could do was stare at the two cats she'd wronged– the deputy she had killed, and the beloved elder who been her first victim.

"I... I'm so sorry," Poppypool stammered, her voice cracking. She dropped her head, her words pouring out, desperate and choked. "I

never meant for any of this to happen. Stormfern, Darkeyes... I'm so sorry for what I've done. I didn't want any of it to happen. Please... forgive me."

The silence that followed was unbearable. She dared to lift her gaze, hoping– *begging*– for some sign of understanding, of forgiveness. But Stormfern's face remained emotionless, her eyes as hard as stone. Darkeyes was equally unreadable, her expression as still and calm as when she had died.

It was the spirit-cat who finally broke the silence. Their voice was soft, but their was no comfort in it– only a firm, undeniable truth. "Forgiveness will take time, Poppypool." You have made choices that hurt many. But we did not come here to talk about your guilt."

Poppypool blinked, her heart racing. "Then why? Why are you here?"

Stormfern stepped forward, her gaze piercing. "You need to stop your apprentice."

Poppypool's breath hitched. "Newtflake?"

"Yes," Stormfern's voice was cold, and it cut through Poppypool's heart like a claw. "He's walking down a dangerous path, one you've seen before. You've felt the lure of vengeance, haven't you? The way it consumes everything, makes you forget who you are."

Poppypool winced, memories of her own mistakes rushing to the forefront of her mind– memories of blood, lies, and betrayal. She had walked that path. She had been blinded by the need to prove herself, to right wrongs that weren't hers to fix.

The spiri-cat's voice filled the space again. "He is becoming isolated. He is closing himself off from the ones who care about him, the way you once did. But there is more– he is walking toward bloodshed."

"No," Poppypool whispered, shaking her head. "Newtflake... He's hurt, yes, but he wouldn't–"

"He *will*," Stormfern interrupted sharply, her tail flicking. "If you don't interfere, he'll be lost to vengeance. And then you'll lose him–

just as you lost yourself."

Poppypool felt a cold shiver run through her body. She had failed Newtflake, failed to notice how far he had fallen into his own grief and anger. How had she not seen it? She had been so focused on her own redemption that she'd let her apprentice spiral without guidance.

"What can I do?" she asked, her voice barely more than a whisper.

"You need to talk to him," Stormfern said, her voice still cold but edged with a hint of urgency. "Before it's too late. He's already teetering on the edge. If you don't act now, there will be no turning back."

The spirit-cat nodded solemnly. "We see him, Poppypool. He is consumed by thoughts of revenge. And if you let him walk this path, it will end in blood. It is foretold in the stars."

The words hung heavily in the air, settling into Poppypool's bones. The thought of Newtflake, her once-bright apprentice, becoming something twisted by anger and hatred made her chest tighten with fear.

Darkeyes, who had remained silent throughout the exchange, finally spoke. Her voice was calm, but there was a weight to her words that Poppypool couldn't ignore. "There's more you must do if you wish to earn my forgiveness, Poppypool."

Poppypool turned to her, her ears pricked. "What more can I do? I'm already trying–"

"You must take care of Hickorytree and Spiritsight's kits," Darkeyes said, her eyes boring into Poppypool's. "Those kits will need you. You will protect them, guide them. And by doing so, you'll begin to make up for the lives you've destroyed."

Poppypool blinked, surprised by the task. She hadn't expected this. "The kits? But... why?"

"Because you failed to protect those who trusted you before," Darkeyes said bluntly. "But this time, you'll do it right. You'll be

there for them as you were not for others."

Poppypool's mind raced. Could she do it? Could she really protect the kits and guide Newtflake away from the path of vengeance? She felt the crushing weight of responsibility settling on her shoulders, but alongside it, a small spark of hope. Maybe this was her chance. Maybe this was how she could begin to make things right.

"I'll do it," she said, her voice steady despite the turmoil inside her. "I'll help Newtflake, and I'll take care of the kits. I promise."

The spirit-cat nodded, their expression softening slightly. "It will not be easy, but it is the path you must take if you wish you find redemption."

Poppypool dipped her head, her heart filled with a mixture of dread and determination. "I'll do whatever it takes."

Stormfern flicked her tail, stepping back into the shadows. "Then start now, before it's too late."

And with that, as the world around her began to fade, the mist swirling once more as the forest dissolved into darkness.

Poppypool jolted awake, her chest heaving as she lay in her nest, her heart still racing from the dream. The den was quiet, the soft sounds of breathing of the other cats were the only noise. The moonlight filtered through the cracks, casting soft beams of light onto the ground.

The message from the three cats had been clear: she had to act. Newtflake was in danger of losing himself to the same darkness that had nearly destroyed her, and if she didn't stop him, it would lead to bloodshed. And then there were Spiritsight's kits– innocent lives that needed her protection.

Poppypool took a deep breath, her resolve hardening. There was no turning back now. She would confront Newtflake, and she would make things right. She would stop him from making the same mistakes she had made.

And maybe, just maybe, she could start to redeem herself.

Chapter 23

Poppypool sat in her den, her paws tingling with unease as she prepared herself for the conversation she knew she had to have with Newtflake. The message from StarClan was clear. She had to stop him before it was too late– before he followed the dark path she knew all too well. The tension weighed on her chest, and silence in the medicine den felt suffocating.

She glanced over at Newtflake, who lay in his nest, his body still bandaged from the rogue attack. His tail flicked irritably, and his ears twitched as if he were having a restless dream. But Poppypool knew this wasn't just about his physical injuries– it was his spirit that was fraying, his heart was darkening.

With a deep breath, she rose to her paws and padded over to him. Her heart pounded in her chest as she called out softly, "Newtflake?"

His eyes snapped open, their yellow-green depths sharp with tension. He blinked at her for a moment, still groggy from sleep, but as he focused, she saw the bitterness simmering beneath the surface. "What is it?" he muttered, his voice rough.

Poppypool hesitated, trying to find the right words. She didn't want to push too hard, but she couldn't delay this conversation any longer. "I need to talk to you... about the attack. And about how you've been feeling."

Newtflake's gaze darkened instantly, his tail lashing behind him as he pushed himself up into a sitting position. "There's nothing to talk about. The rogues need to pay for what they did to Daisystep and Cedarpelt." His voice was filled with barely restrained anger, and the look in his eyes sent a shiver down Poppypool's spine.

"I know you're angry," Poppypool began, keeping her voice gentle and firm. "But you can't let that anger control you. I've seen where that path leads, and it will only end in more pain."

Newtflake's fur bristled. "What else am I supposed to feel?" he snapped. "They killed Daisystep. She's dead because of them, and Cedarpelt nearly joined her! And what have we done? Nothing. We're just sitting here, letting them get away with it."

Poppypool felt her heart ache at the raw grief and fury in his voice. She had to tread carefully, but she couldn't let him spiral any further. "Revenge isn't the answer, Newtflake. It might feel like it now, but going after them with rage in your heart will only lead to more suffering– for you, and for the rest of the Clan."

Newtflake's eyes blazed as he shot to his paws, his claws unsheathing instinctively. "You don't understand!" he growled. "You didn't see Daisystep lying there, her blood staining the ground. You weren't there when Cedarpelt was barely breathing, and I had to drag him back while those filthy rogues slinked away!"

Poppypool flinched at his words, her own memories of violence flashing through her mind– blood on her paws, lives lost because of her choices. She took a step closer to him, trying to calm her racing heart. "Newtflake, I do understand. I know what it's like to want revenge more than anything. But it doesn't make things better. It makes everything worse."

He scoffed, glaring at her with disbelief. "How could you possibly know what I'm feeling right now?"

Poppypool hesitated, the weight of her past pressing down on her. She had never spoken to him about her darker moments, her regrets, or the way she had been consumed by her own need to make things right. But now, she realized, it was time.

"Because I've been there," she admitted quietly, her voice trembling. "I've walked down that path, and I lost myself in the process. I did things... terrible things, all because I thought I was doing the right thing. I wasn't. I was only making things worse and bringing more pain."

Newtflake stared at her, his expression hardening as her words sank in. "You're saying I should just forgive them? Let them get away with killing another one of our warriors?"

Poppypool shook her head. "No, I'm not saying you should forgive them. But vengeance isn't the way to honor Daisystep's memory; Justice is. We'll face the rogues when the time is right, but we have to be smart about it. We have to protect the Clan first. If we rush into this fight fueled by rage, we'll lose more lives."

Newtflake's tail lashed, and for a moment, she thought he might lash out again. But then his shoulders sagged, and he looked away, his eyes clouded with pain. "I don't know if I can let go of this, Poppypool. It's like... it's burning inside me."

Poppypool stepped closer, her voice softening as she placed her tail lightly on his shoulder. "I know, and it's not something you can just forget. But I'm here to help you and we'll figure this out together. You don't have to carry this burden alone."

Newtflake glanced at her, his anger slowly ebbing away, leaving behind the raw grief he had been hiding. "You really think I can move past this?" he asked, his voice quieter now, filled with uncertainty.

Poppypool nodded. "I do. Remember how you were always there for me and telling me to rest?" Her apprentice nodded. "You need to let yourself do that. Not just your body, but your heart, too. I believe in you, Newtflake. You're stronger than you realize."

He didn't respond for a moment, his gaze fixed on the ground as if lost in thought. Then, with a weary sigh, he sat back down, the fight draining from his posture. "I don't know what to do anymore," he admitted. "I just want everyone back. I want everything to go back to how they were before all of... this."

Poppypool's heart ached at his words. She knew that feeling all too well– the desperate wish to turn back time, to undo the choices that led to so much loss. But she also knew it wasn't possible.

"We can't change the past," she said softly. "But we can choose what we do now. You can choose to honor your Clanmates by protecting the Clan, not risking your life in a blind pursuit of revenge."

Newtflake glanced at her, his eyes filled with pain but also with a

glimmer of understanding. He gave a small, reluctant nod, though the anger still simmered beneath the surface. "I'll try," he muttered, though his voice lacked conviction.

"It's a start," Poppypool replied, relief washing over her as she saw him begin to soften. She wasn't sure how long it would take for him to fully come to terms with his grief and rage, but at least he was willing to try.

As he lowered himself back into his nest, his body clearly still exhausted from his injuries, Poppypool stepped back. "Get some rest. We'll talk more later."

Newtflake didn't argue, simply closing his eyes and letting out a slow, ragged breath. Poppypool watched him for a moment, her heart heavy with both hope and fear. She had taken a step toward helping him, but she knew there was still a long way to go.

And somewhere deep inside, the weight of her own guilt pressed on her, reminding her that she too had a long road ahead.

*****

The air in the nursery was warm and comforting as Poppypool entered, her soft pawsteps barely making a sound on the well-trodden earth. Hickorytree lay in the far corner, his body curled protectively around his four kits: Darkkit, Crowkit, Condorkit, and Magpiekit. The nursery had an almost peaceful lull to it, but beneath that peace, Poppypool could sense the ever-present worry in Hickorytree's gaze. She watched as his eyes flickered from one kit to the next, never staying still for too long, constantly vigilant.

"Hickorytree," Poppypool meowed gently, padding over to him. He blinked up at her, ears twitching as he raised his head from his nest.

"Poppypool, what brings you in?" he asked, trying to sound casual, but the tightness in his voice betrayed him. He was exhausted, the constant vigilance wearing him down.

Poppypool sat down beside him, wrapping her tail around her paws. "You've been in here for a moon, hardly leaving the nursery.

You need a break, Hickorytree. Go out and stretch your legs, get something to eat, maybe even go on a patrol."

Hickorytree immediately shook his head, his eyes darting to his kits as they napped, their tiny bodies rising and falling with each breath. "I can't leave them," he said firmly. "What if something happens? They're still so young..."

"They'll be fine," Poppypool interrupted, her voice calm but insistent. "I'll stay with them the whole time. If anything happens, I'll send someone to get you, but you need to take care of yourself, too."

Hickorytree hesitated, the worry in his eyes deepening. "I don't know... they need me."

"They need you to be strong and healthy for them," Poppypool countered, her gaze softening. "Right now, you're exhausted, and that's not going to help anyone. Please, just take a little time for yourself."

He looked back at the kits, conflicted, but the weariness in his bones must have won out. With a sigh, he relented. "Alright... but if they so much as sneeze–"

"I'll come running," Poppypool finished for him with a gentle purr. "Now go on, I've got this."

Hickorytree rose to her paws, his movements slow and tired, as if the weight of the world had been pressing down on him. He cast one last, lingering glance at his kits before stepping out of the nursery. "Thank you, Poppypool," he murmured, his voice low. "I'll be back soon."

Once he was gone, Poppypool turned her attention to the kits. They were still sleeping, huddled together in a pile of tiny limbs and soft fur, their little noses twitching as they dreamed. The sight made Poppypool's heart clench. These innocent lives depended on her now, not just for their physical safety, but for their future as well. Darkeyes had told her to take care of them, and she intended to keep that promise.

It wasn't long before the kits began to stir, their little eyes blinking open as they woke from their nap. Darkkit, the boldest of the litter, was the first to rise, stretching her tiny legs before tumbling over her siblings in an attempt to get to Poppypool.

"Hey, easy there," Poppypool laughed softly, extending a paw to steady her. Darkkit batted at her paw playfully, her eyes gleaming with excitement.

"I'm gonna be the best warrior!" she declared proudly, her chest puffing out.

"Oh, I'm sure you will," Poppypool said, amused. "But first, you've got to learn how to walk without tripping over your own paws."

Darkkit gave a little huff, clearly undeterred by her teasing. Her brothers, Crowkit and Condorkit, weren't far behind. Crowkit, always the quieter of the two, padded over more cautiously, his tail twitching as he eyed Poppypool curiously. Condorkit, on the other hand, came barereling after Darkkit, tackling him from behind and sending the two into a playful wrestling match.

Poppypool watched with a smile as they tussled, their squeals and laughter filling the nursery. "Careful, you two," she warned lightly. "Don't want to hurt each other."

Magpiekit, the smallest of the litter, was slower to rise. She stayed close to Poppypool's side, her eyes wide and observant as she watched her littermates. There was a quiet intelligence in her gaze, a calmness that reminded Poppypool of herself when she was younger. Magpiekit didn't jump into the fray like the others; instead, she nuzzled against Poppypool, seeking the warmth and comfort of her fur.

"You're the thoughtful one, aren't you?" Poppypool murmured to Magpiekit, running her tail gently along the kit's back. Magpiekit purred softly, pressing closer.

As the day went on, the kits became more energetic, bounding around the nursery with boundless excitement. Darkkit continued to lead the charge, constantly challenging her brothers to games of

chase or mock battles, while Condorkit tried to outdo her with his own displays of bravery. Crowkit was more hesitant, hanging back at times, but he occasionally joined in, especially when Darkkit goaded him into action.

Poppypool played along, batting at them lightly with her paws and keeping a watchful eye to make sure no one got too rough. She felt a warmth in her chest as she watched them play, their innocent joy a stark contrast to the darkness that had been clouding her mind. For the first time in moons, Poppypool felt a sliver of peace.

But that peace was fragile. Every so often, her thoughts would drift back to her dream, of Darkeyes and Stormfern's words, and to Newtflake's growing desire for revenge. She had a long way to go when it came to him, but it seemed like he was taking a step in the right direction.

The kits finally began to tire as the sun started to set, their energy waning as they curled up in a pile against Poppypool's belly. She draped her tail over them protectively, her heart swelling with both love and sorrow. These little ones were so full of life, so innocent. She had to protect them, not matter what.

As the kits drifted off to sleep, Poppypool's mind wandered back to Hickorytree, to her promise to Darkeyes, and to the weight of her guilt. Could she truly make up for her mistakes? Could she earn her redemption? She didn't know, but as she lay there with the kits nestled against her, she knew one thing for sure: she wouldn't stop trying.

The soft breathing of the kits filling the nursery as the light of day faded, and Poppypool allowed herself to close her eyes. For now, at least, she had started on the path to redemption. Tomorrow would bring new challenges, but tonight, she could rest knowing that she had kept her promise to the spirits that watched over her.

Chapter 24

The moonlight filtered through the small gaps in the den's roof, casting faint silver light onto the mossy nests. The camp was still, only the distant rustle of the long grass and occasional hoot of an owl breaking the silence. Poppypool shifted in her sleep, her body curled around the remnants of the day's anxiety. She hadn't slept deeply in moons, and tonight was no exception.

A sharp gasp shattered the quiet of the medicine den.

Poppypool's eyes snapped open. For a moment, she wasn't sure what had roused her, but then she saw the small, trembling figure of Dusk bolt upright in their nest, eyes wide with panic. They were panting, their fur bristling as if they had just been in a fight.

"Dusk," Poppypool called softly, rising from her nest and padding over. "Hey, it's alright. You're safe."

Dusk didn't respond at first, still lost in the terror of their dream. They were staring straight ahead, their chest heaving as though they were still running from something– or someone.

Poppypool reached out gently, touching her tail to Dusk's shoulder. "Dusk, it was just a nightmare. You're here, in GlacierClan. Nothing's going to hurt you."

Dusk blinked, slowly coming back to reality. Their trembling began to ease as they looked at Poppypool, their wide, fearful eyes beginning to soften with recognition. They took a shaky breath, though their body still shivered.

"I..." Dusk's voice was weak, barely more than a whisper. "I dreamt about them."

Poppypool tilted her head, concern etching her features. "The rogues?"

Dusk nodded, their gaze dropping to their paws, as though ashamed. "I couldn't... I couldn't get away from them. They were everywhere. They kept chasing me. Gravel... Ridge... Vine... I couldn't escape."

Poppypool settled down beside Dusk, her fur brushing against theirs in a comforting gesture. "Tell me what happened."

Dusk hesitated, their breath still uneven, but then the words tumbled out of them, as though the weight of the nightmare had loosened their tongue. "Gravel– he's the leader. He... he's the one who killed my mother. He took me after that, made me a part of his group when I was just a kit. I never had a choice."

Poppypool's heart clenched, horrified. She had known the rogues were dangerous, but this... this was far worse than she had imagined. "That's terrible," she whispered, her voice soft with sympathy. "I'm so sorry, Dusk."

Dusk continued, their voice shaking as the memories spilled out. "Gravel's ruthless. He doesn't care about anyone but himself. If anyone crosses him, he makes sure they regret it– he's... cold, Poppypool. He doesn't feel anything. He just takes."

Poppypool listened quietly, her heart aching for the young cat. "And the others?" she prompted gently, sensing that there was more that Dusk needed to say.

"Ridge," Dusk muttered, their fur bristling again at the name. "She's Gravel's second-in-command. She's not as cruel, but she's... she's deadly. She's Gravel's biggest supporter. In battle, she's swift– she kills without hesitation, without a single misstep. Everyone is terrified of her."

Poppypool's tail twitched uneasily. The idea of cats like Gravel and Ridge roaming the territory, threatening her Clanmates, made her fur prickle with tension.

But it was Dusk's next words that sent a chill down Poppypool's spine.

"Vine," Dusk whispered, their voice thick with a mixture of fear and resentment. "She was supposed to be my mentor. She taught me how to fight, but... she enjoyed it too much. She didn't just fight– she liked to mock her enemies, to humiliate them before finishing them off. She kept pushing me to be more violent, to use my claws in ways I didn't want to." They swallowed hard, their eyes dark with the memories. "I hated it. But if I didn't listen... she'd punish me."

Poppypool felt a wave of nausea rise in her chest as she imagined what Dusk must have gone through, caught between the expectations of such cruel cats. She closed her eyes briefly, trying to steady herself. When she opened them again, her gaze was firm, filled with determination.

"You don't have to worry about them anymore, Dusk," Poppypool said gently with a sharp edge of resolve in her voice. "The rogues aren't going to hurt you again. We'll deal with them. I promise you, they won't lay a claw on you while you're in GlacierClan."

Dusk blinked up at her, their wide eyes filled with uncertainty. "Why... why are you helping me?" they asked quietly, their voice tinged with vulnerability. "After everything... after what I was part of. Why did you bring me here?"

Poppypool looked down at the young cat, her expression softening. "Because you deserve a second chance, Dusk," she replied, her voice full of warmth and compassion. "I know what it's like to feel trapped, to be pushed into doing things you never wanted. You and I aren't as different as you think."

Dusk's ears twitched, and they stared at Poppypool with a mixture of surprise and curiosity. "What do you mean?"

Poppypool hesitated for a moment, thinking of her own dark past, the guilt she carried every day. "I made mistakes, too," she confessed, her voice quieter now. "Big ones. I hurt cats I cared about... I lost my way for a while. But I'm trying to make things right."

Dusk stared at her, their fear and confusion slowly giving way to something softer– understanding. They shifted closer to her,

pressing their head gently against her shoulder. "Thank you," they whispered, their voice barely audible. "For helping me."

Poppypool wrapped her tail around Dusk, holding them close. "I'll always help those in need, Dusk," she promised softly, her heart swelling with emotion. "No matter what."

The two sat in silence for a while, the fear of Dusk's nightmare fading in the quiet comfort of Poppypool's presence. Though the shadows of their past still lingered, Poppypool knew that with time, Dusk might find peace in GlacierClan. And as for herself... she was beginning to believe that maybe, just maybe, she could find redemption too.

As the moonlight continued to filter through the den, Poppypool stayed by Dusk's side, knowing that whatever battles lay ahead– against the rogues or within themselves– they would face them together.

*****

The sun was just beginning to dip below the distant trees, casting long shadows across GlacierClan's camp as the familiar rustle of paws announced the arrival of visitors. Poppypool had been tending to Dusk's wounds when she heard the commotion, her ears perking at the unexpected guests. She emerged, curiosity pulling her forward, and saw a small group of DawnClan cats standing in the center of camp, their leader Emberstar at the head, with Gingerheart and a few other warriors at his side.

The GlacierClan warriors, who had gathered at the edge of the camp, were watching the visitors with wary eyes. Tensions between DawnClan and GlacierClan had always run high, and an unannounced visit like this was enough to put everyone on edge. Poppypool's eyes flicked to Sparrowstar, who had stepped out of her den to greet their guests, her expression unreadable but the flicker of tension in her posture was unmistakable.

Emberstar, with his sleek, tortoiseshell pelt catching in the fading light, dipped his head respectfully. "Sparrowstar," he began, his voice calm but laced with an underlying urgency. "We come with

news about the rogues."

The mention of rogues immediately had Poppypool's attention. She stayed a respectful distance back but strained to listen, her tail flicking nervously.

Sparrowstar's expression darkened, her yellow eyes narrowing as she stepped forward to meet him. "Go on," she said, her voice low, but there was no mistaking the tension behind it.

Emberstar glanced over his shoulder at Gingerheart, his deputy, before continuing. "The rogues have begun sniffing around our territory. We've had several sightings near the pine forests that borders your moors. They're scouting, probing our borders, and we're certain they're planning something bigger."

The murmurs from the gathered GlacierClan warriors grew louder. Poppypool's ears twitched as she listened to the ripple of concern spread through the camp. Even from her vantage point just outside her den, she could feel the anxiety that this news stirred in the hearts of her Clanmates. But what caught her attention even more was the way Sparrowstar's tail lashed, betraying her frustration.

"The rogues have already attacked us multiple times," Sparrowstar said, her voice tight. "They nearly overran our camp a half a moon ago. Our warriors are growing weary, and if we don't find a way to stop them, they'll come back stronger next time."

Gingerheart stepped forward, his gaze sharp as a thorn. "We don't like rogues any more than GlacierClan does," he said coldly. "And while DawnClan and GlacierClan have never been allies, we can't ignore the fact that this threat effects all of us. The rogues are growing more organized, bold, and if we don't work together, they'll tear through both our Clans."

Poppypool's fur bristled at the thought of these rogues creeping closer to the heart of their territories. She could feel the chill run down her spine as she remembered the aftermath of the GlacierClan camp raid– the blood, the death, the fear. And now, the thought of the rogues getting bolder, moving through the forests with confidence, filled her with dread. She wasn't sure what scared her

more– the rogues themselves, or the idea of working alongside DawnClan after so many seasons of rivalry.

Sparrowstar, though, was unshaken. She lifted her chin, her gaze hard. "Are you suggesting an alliance?"

Emberstar nodded slowly. "Yes. Too many lives have already been lost, and more will follow if we don't act. The rogues don't care for borders, and they certainly don't respect our traditions. If we join forces, we can drive them out for good. But we can't do this alone."

A murmur of surprise swept through the GlacierClan cats. Poppypool could see the conflicted looks in their eyes– some seemed hopeful at the thought of help, while others were wary of trusting their long-standing rivals. She couldn't blame them. But as she studied Sparrowstar's face, she could see that the GlacierClan leader was weighing her options, considering the risks, and perhaps even struggling with her own pride.

"We've fought them tooth and claw," Sparrowstar admitted, her voice softer now, though the edge of tension still lingered. "But they just keep coming back. Every patrol is tense, every day we wonder when they'll strike next. My warriors need a break, and I can't afford to lose more of them."

Emberstar's eyes softened. "I understand. DawnClan has been on edge for moons now, with every report of rogue activity bringing us closer to a full-blown war. But if we stand together, we have a chance to protect our Clans from further bloodshed."

Sparrowstar was quiet for a long moment. Poppypool held her breath, watching as her leader's tail flicked thoughtfully. The silence stretched, and for a heartbeat, Poppypool feared Sparrowstar might reject the offer, too proud to accept help from DawnClan.

But then, Sparrowstar spoke. "Very well," she said, her tone measured. "I'll consider this alliance, but I want to make one thing clear: GlacierClan does not need DawnClan's charity. We'll fight side by side as equals, or not at all."

A flicker of approval passed across Emberstar's face. He dipped his head in agreement. "Of course. We wouldn't have it any other way."

Poppypool exhaled, realizing she'd been holding her breath. The tension in the air seemed to lift, if only slightly, and for the first time in a while, there was a glimmer of hope on the horizon. Maybe, just maybe, this alliance could help turn the tide against the rogues.

Gingerheart stepped forward again, his voice firm. "We'll discuss the details of how we can work together at the next Gathering. In the meantime, we'll increase our patrols along the border. Any sign of the rogues, and we'll send word."

Sparrowstar nodded. "Agreed. And thank you. GlacierClan is in your debt for offering this alliance. We've all lost too much to these rogues, and I'm relieved to have your support."

Emberstar's expression softened. "No debt, Sparrowstar. We're doing what needs to be done. The rogues are a threat to all of us, and together, we can put an end to this before any more lives are lost."

As the DawnClan cats turned to leave, Poppypool's gaze lingered on them. She couldn't help but feel a mixture of relief and anxiety. The idea of working with DawnClan felt strange, foreign even, but the threat of the rogues was more pressing than old rivalries. She watched as Emberstar's tortoiseshell pelt disappeared through the camp entrance, and for a brief moment, she allowed herself to hope that this alliance would be the turning point they needed.

But deep down, there was still that gnawing fear. What if it wasn't enough? What if the rogues were stronger than they thought?

Poppypool shook her head, pushing the dark thoughts away as she retreated into her den. For now, all she could do was prepare for the battles ahead– and hope that, when the time came, GlacierClan and DawnClan would be ready to face whatever lay in wait beyond the borders.

Chapter 25

As dawn spread across camp, filling the medicine den with a gentle glow, Poppypool noticed Dusk stirring in their nest. They looked around with wide eyes, still carrying that uneasy wariness, but after a moment, their gaze settled on her, watching her sort through the herbs with a shy curiosity.

"Good morning, Dusk," Poppypool greeted them warmly, hoping to ease some of their tension. "Did you sleep well?"

Dusk nodded slowly, still not meeting her eyes, and then dropped their gaze to the scattered goldenrod leaves at her paws. Poppypool tilted her head, considering her next words, and then offered a hopeful smile. "I could use some help, if you're up for it. The wind last night knocked everything around, and it'd be nice to have an extra set of paws."

"Wh-where's Newtflake?" The young cat asked, their voice trembling slightly.

Poppypool hummed to herself as she flicked her tail, gesturing them to come join her. "Newtflake is checking on the elders and kits." She met their gaze, her eyes soft. "It's just you and I in the den right now."

Dusk hesitated, their tail tip twitching uncertainly. But after a few heartbeats, they stepped forward, gaze flicking nervously between the goldenrod and Poppypool, as if searching for permission.

"Of course," she encouraged gently. "Here, just gather the leaves together and make sure none of them are wilted."

Dusk watched her demonstrate, then slowly mimicked her, carefully gathering each leaf as if it might break at the slightest touch. They worked in silence, though every so often Poppypool caught Dusk glancing her way, a hint of timid curiosity shining in their eyes.

After a while, she decided to break the quiet. "You know, you're a natural at this. I think Newtflake would be thrilled to have someone helping out around here. He's a good teacher– even teaching me a few things– and I think he'd enjoy showing you some herb basics."

Dusk froze, their paw stopping mid-air. The light curiosity faded instantly, replaced by a flash of fear as their ears pressed flat against their head. "Newtflake?" they echoed, their voice barely a whisper. "He... he hates me."

Poppypool frowned gently, searching their face. "He doesn't hate you, Dusk. I know he's been upset about the attack, but he's not one to hold onto anger without reason." She softened her tone, hoping to soothe them. "And he'd see how hard you're trying."

Dusk shook their head, backing away slightly as if the thought itself was too much to bear. "No... he hates me. All of them do. They think I'm just like the others." They curled their tail tightly around themselves, shoulders tensing with every word. "I shouldn't even be here. I shouldn't be helping..."

"Dusk," Poppypool said quietly, moving a step closer, "you don't have to prove anything to anyone. I brought you here because I see you as more than just... just a rogue. You deserve to be safe, to learn, and maybe even find a place here."

For a heartbeat, Dusk looked at her with something like hope flickering in their eyes, but it was quickly buried under a blanket of doubt. "You... you don't know what they're like. The others. They'd hurt me if they knew I was here," they whispered, their voice quivering with the memories they were struggling to suppress. "I don't belong here, not when everyone sees me as... as dangerous."

Poppypool's heart ached at the anguish in their voice. She reached out, brushing her tail gently against their flank. "I know it's hard, but trust me, you're not alone. And I promise I'll be here with you, no matter what." She paused, watching as they blinked at her, their expression softening just a little. "No one can change overnight, Dusk. It takes time, and I'll be here for you every step of the way."

Dusk's eyes dropped, and they gave a small nod, their shoulders

slumping with exhaustion. Without another word, they turned and padded back to their nest, curling up tightly, facing away from her. Poppypool watched them in silence, sadness tugging at her heart. She wanted to reach out, to offer more comfort, but she knew when to hold back. For now, Dusk needed space, and she couldn't force them to feel safe.

As she returned to her herbs, the den seemed to feel quieter, almost hollow. Every crackling leaf and every shift in her own movements felt loud in the stillness. But every now and then, her gaze flickered to where Dusk lay curled up, their form small and guarded.

For now, she'd let them rest. But in her heart, Poppypool vowed she wouldn't give up on them– no matter how long it took for Dusk to trust that this could be a home, too.

*****

As the sun hung overhead, Poppypool nudged Newtflake, gesturing toward the nursery. He followed her, a questioning look on his face as they padded through the den to find Hickorytree curled protectively around his kits.

"Hickorytree," Poppypool greeted, prodding his shoulder gently. "Why don't you go on a hunt? Newtflake and I can watch the kits."

Hickorytree blinked drowsily and cast a wary glance at his kits, who were fast asleep in a heap of soft fur. He looked back at her uncertainly. "Are you sure? They're quite the pawful..."

Poppypool gave a reassuring nod. "We'll be fine. If anything happens, we'll send someone to fetch you."

After a brief hesitation, Hickorytree relaxed, a hint of relief on his face "Alright, then." He licked each kit's head in turn, whispering softly to them, before slipping out of the nursery.

The moment he was gone, the kits sprang to life. They scattered like a burst of leaves, squeaking with excitement as they tumbled over one another, paws reaching for everything that moved. Poppypool chuckled, trying to keep up as Condorkit tugged on a piece of moss

she had been fidgeting with.

"Alright, you little troublemakers!" she said with a laugh, her heart feeling light. "Who's brave enough to wrestle Newtflake here?"

Darkkit gave a shrill squeal and launched herself onto Newtflake's tail, clinging with tiny claws. Newtflake flinched, looking down at the kit clinging to him as if unsure how to react.

"What are you waiting for, Newtflake?" Poppypool teased. "She's challenging you!"

Newtflake's eyes softened, and he gingerly nudged the kit with his nose, a rare, amused smile that had been hidden since the attack. Darkkit squealed and rolled onto her back, pawing at Newtflake's muzzle as the other kits pounced around them.

As Poppypool watched, she turned the conversation to what had been weighing on her mind. "You know," she began, "I've noticed Dusk has shown an interest in herbs recently. It's... it's surprising, but in a good way."

Newtflake's smile faded, replaced with a skeptical frown. "Dusk? A rogue, interested in herbs?" He shook his head dismissively. "Rogues don't care about healing. They only care about themselves."

Poppypool's eyes narrowed, and she cuffed him lightly over the ear. "That's enough, Newtflake," she said sharply. "What's gotten into you? You're so quick to judge."

He flattened his ears, looking away as he grumbled, "I just don't trust them. Who knows what they're really here for."

Poppypool let out an exasperated sigh, her voice softening but remaining firm. "Take a good look at Dusk," she said. "Really look. They're scared, young, and all alone in a place they barely understand. Do you truly believe they mean any harm?"

Newtflake shifted, his eyes dropping to little Magpiekit as she pawed at his tail. He didn't answer, but his silence spurred Poppypool on, her own frustrations spilling out like floodwater.

"Do you even know what it feels like to be looked at with nothing but fear and mistrust? To be seen as a threat just because of where you came from?" She paused, feeling a lump form in her throat as Darkeyes and Stormfern's faces flashed through her mind. "Dusk has done nothing to deserve this treatment. They're just a young cat trying to get out from under a life they didn't choose."

Newtflake's expression was guarded, but his flicking tail betrayed the conflict in his mind. "But they were in that group. They were raised by them. How can we be sure they're... safe?"

Poppypool's eyes softened, her voice gentling. "Newtflake, you were born in a Clan, raised with the belief that loyalty and compassion are the marks of true warriors. And Dusk? They were taken from their mother, trained to be something they never chose to be. How can you hold that against them?"

The silence stretched, filled only by the kits' playful squeaks. Newtflake's gaze remained fixed on the ground, his ears twitching, clearly wrestling with her words. He finally muttered, "I don't hate them. It's just... hard. They don't belong here. It feels wrong."

Poppypool softened, reaching out gently to touch his shoulder. "Your father wasn't born in GlacierClan, and he fits in well. Dusk's shown nothing but kindness and a desire to learn. Isn't that worth something?"

Newtflake didn't respond immediately, but the tension in his shoulders eased, and he looked back her, his eyes clouded with doubt. Crowkit pawed at his face beside him, demanding his attention, and for a moment, his hardened expression melted as he gently nudged the little tom back.

Poppypool watched the small, vulnerable kit snuggle closer to Newtflake, a small smile on her face. "Think about it," she said softly. "If Dusk were born in the Clan, they'd be like one of these kits, wouldn't they? Innocent and trusting, hoping to be welcomed."

Newtflake didn't respond, but she could see his thoughts shifting, the rigid anger softening just a little. It was a start. She could only hope that, in time, he'd see Dusk as she did– a lost soul seeking a

second chance. Just like her.

Chapter 26

As dawn spilled over GlacierClan's camp, a joyful buzz pulsed through the clearing. The news of Sparrowstar's new litter had spread fast, igniting a warmth that cut through the chill of leaf-fall. Every cat seemed to have a bit more spring in their step, their eyes bright with excitement. Poppypool observed from the shadows of her den as warriors, apprentices, and elders exchanged whispers about the new arrivals, four kits in all: three daughters– Mousekit, Sagekit, and Cricketkit– and one son, Stagkit.

Cedarpelt had barely contained himself when Poppypool gave him the news. He'd raced to the nursery, his eyes wet with tears of joy as he padded in to see his family. It warmed Poppypool's heart to watch him disappear into the nursery, and she couldn't help but feel a little lighter.

But then her gaze drifted, catching on a figure sitting at the camp's edge, his expression distant and haunted. Hickorytree was watching the nursery too, but his face was etched with a quiet sorrow that cut through the camp's joyful hum. Without a second thought, Poppypool approached him, sitting beside him in silence for a moment before gently nudging his shoulder with her muzzle.

"Hickorytree," she murmured. "Are you alright?"

He looked at her, his eyes rimmed with tears he was fighting to hold back. After a moment, he sighed, his voice barely a whisper. "It's just... they're all so happy." His gaze returned to the nursery, his voice breaking. "Spiritsight should be here, Poppypool. She'd know exactly how to calm them, keep them safe. She'd... she'd do everything they need."

Poppypool felt the ache in his voice and placed a paw on his, her voice soft and reassuring. "I know, Hickorytree. Spiritsight's absence is felt by every one of us, but especially by you and the kits. But she's here, in ways we can't always see. I can promise you she's watching over you– and those kits."

Hickorytree stared down at their joined paws, struggling with his own heartache. "I just worry, every day. Am I enough for them without her? How do I make sure they don't feel this... this emptiness that I do?"

Poppypool's voice took on a firm, gentle strength. "You do it by telling them her stories, by reminding them how much she loved them. She's with you, in every story, every memory, every moment. You're stronger than you think, Hickorytree, and she lives on through you."

For a moment, he was silent, her words relaxing some of the tension in his shoulders. Then he let out a soft, bittersweet laugh, his shoulders slumping as he released the weight he'd been carrying. "Thank you, Poppypool. I needed to hear that. Sometimes it just... it gets to be too much."

"I understand," she said, squeezing his paw gently. "But remember, you're not alone. And the Clan still needs you too, now more than ever. With Sparrowstar's new litter and all the threats we're facing, the Clan needs its deputy back."

Hickorytree's gaze followed hers back to the nursery, where he saw Cedarpelt peeking out, beaming at his new family. "You're right," he murmured, straightening a bit. "The kits will be alright. You've done so much already, and you're right– they need their deputy." He smiled at her, something lighter and more hopeful in his expression. "I'll speak with Sparrowstar. It's time for me to go back to my duties."

Poppypool nodded approvingly. "Good. And I'll still be here for the kits whenever they need me. You've done more than enough, Hickorytree."

Hickorytree turned to her, a glimmer of appreciation in his eyes. "Thank you, Poppypool. I don't know what I'd do without you."

At that moment, a familiar bundle of fur tumbled over Hickorytree's paws, squealing with excitement. The kits had noticed their father was out of the nursery and were now climbing all over him, nipping

playfully and darting between his legs. He let out a laugh, the sound full and rich, his heartache melting in the presence of his kits.

"Whoa! Slow down!" he chuckled, swatting playfully at Crowkit as he scrambled around him. Darkkit leaped forward, her tiny paws batting at Hickorytree's tail, while her brother scrambled up to perch triumphantly on his back.

"Look at me, I'm taller than you, Papa!" Condorkit boasted, puffing out his tiny chest.

"Oh, really?" Hickorytree growled playfully, bucking his back just enough to send Condorkit tumbling down, laughing.

Poppypool watched them with a smile, warmth blooming in her chest. Magpiekit and Crowkit came trotting over to her, each of them eyeing her with wide, curious eyes.

"Are you gonna tell us stories about StarClan?" Crowkit asked, blinking up at her with wonder.

"Of course," Poppypool purred, reaching down to nuzzle the two kits. "I'll tell you all about the stars, and how every warrior who walks with StarClan is watching over us."

Magpiekit nudged her brother, jerking her paws and twitching her ears and tail. Poppypool tipped her head to one side, confused, but Crowkit seemed to understand what his sister was trying to say.

"And our mother?" Crowkit asked, his eyes wide and hopeful.

Poppypool felt her throat tighten, but she nodded, her voice warm and steady. "Yes, little one. Your mother's there too. She watches over you every single day."

Magpiekit's face softened, a quiet smile spreading across her tiny muzzle. She leaned into Poppypool, eyes fluttering shut as if at peace.

Hickorytree watched the scene, eyes shining with gratitude and love as he looked at Poppypool. "Thank you," he whispered, his voice

thick with emotion.

They sat together, Poppypool and Hickorytree, the kits bounding around them like small, swirling whirlwinds. And in that moment, Poppypool felt a new sense of hope rise within Hickorytree, a strength that would carry him forward, supported by the love of his Clanmates and the memory of Spiritsight.

*****

The stillness of the night was broken only by a low, muttered curse drifting through the medicine den. Poppypool's ears pricked, and she lifted her head, blinking the sleep from her eyes. She quickly scanned the den– Newtflake and Dusk were still asleep, and no warriors had entered with an injury. Yet the faint scent of fresh air wafted through the den, carrying with it an undeniable scent: Pikedive.

Frowning, Poppypool got to her paws and crept to the camp entrance, watching as the tip of a tail flicked out of sight. She hesitated. Pikedive had never been the most loyal Clanmate– taking a mate outside the Clan, denouncing the litter she'd given birth to, and eventually killing her in battle– but surely he was just going to the dirtplace, right? Until he glanced over his shoulder with a note of fear in his eyes. A shiver of unease ran down her spine.

Making her choice, Poppypool slipped out of camp, her pawsteps soft and sure as she followed into the quiet moorland. She kept a distance, tracking him as he navigated GlacierClan's territory with an unsettling urgency, glancing over his shoulder as if he was afraid of being seen. Her heartbeat quickened. They were nearing the Clan's border, a line most cats would never cross without good reason. Yet Pikedive continued, slipping into a small grove on the edge of the territory.

Poppypool crouched low in the shadows, watching as he stopped and peered around, his gaze intense and wary. Moments later, another cat emerged from the underbrush– a rogue, fur scruffy and mottled, eyes flashing as he regarded Pikedive with a knowing smirk.

The rogue tipped his head, his voice a low, mocking purr. "You're late."

Pikedive's eyes narrowed. "I had to make sure no one saw me. Do you think I want my Clan to know I'm meeting with you?"

The rogue's smirk widened. "Only if you're interested in an early death."

Poppypool tensed, holding her breath as she listened. The rogue's voice had an edge that chilled her. This wasn't just any rogue; there was malice, power, even arrogance in his tone.

"So," the rogue continued, "do you have something useful, or did you come just to waste my time?"

Pikedive stiffened, his tail flicking with irritation. "I heard GlacierClan will be sending a patrol to the upperlands at dawn. They're stretched thin; half the cats are still nursing injuries from the camp raid. It'll be an easy ambush, if you're careful."

The rogue chuckled darkly. "Easy, you say? You Clan cats really are clueless." He leaned closer to Pikedive, a sneer in his voice. "Remember, we're letting you live for now. You're useful– barely. Don't think you're doing us any favors."

Pikedive lowered his gaze, his tail flicking. "I'm doing what I can to keep the peace," he muttered. "You don't know what the Clan's been through. This is my only chance to keep everyone safe."

The rogue scoffed, feigning sympathy. "Oh, what a noble cat you are, trying to 'keep the peace'." He spat the words with disdain, then leaned in, eyes glinting dangerously. "Here's a word of advice: we don't care about your Clan's survival. You're only alive because we say you are. Cross us, or fail us, and you won't live long enough to see who wins this 'peace' you're so desperate for."

Pikedive bristled, but he remained silent, his eyes cast downward.

Poppypool felt her claws dig into the ground, rage swelling in her chest. As the rogue turned to leave, she leaped from the shadows, her voice a fierce, low hiss. "Pikedive."

Pikedive spun around, eyes wide, and the rogue halted, surprised but quickly amused.

"Well, well, look who it is." The rogue's smirk returned, and he gave Pikedive a mocking look. "Caught by one of your own. Guess loyalty isn't your strong suit after all."

Pikedive's gaze was desperate as he faced Poppypool. "It's not what it looks like–"

"Not what it looks like?" Poppypool's voice was sharp with fury, her eyes blazing. "I just heard everything, Pikedive. You're meeting with the rogues, trading secrets about our patrols. And you call that 'keeping the peace'?"

Pikedive took a step toward her, ears flattening. "You don't understand! I'm trying to protect the Clan! If they see me as an ally, they'll keep their claws off GlacierClan!"

Poppypool's eyes narrowed as she stared him down, unrelenting. "And you really believe that? Do you think they're just going to leave us alone because you're telling them which patrols to ambush? You're a fool if you believe they'll ever respect you or the Clan."

The rogue tilted his head, watching the exchange with a dark amusement. "She's got a point," he sneered. "But keep going, it's very touching– like watching a rabbit beg a hawk not to eat it."

Poppypool ignored him, her gaze fixed on Pikedive. "You're betraying your Clan, Pikedive. Every time you meet with them, every piece of information you give, you're putting all of us in danger."

Pikedive's face twisted, frustration and fear flickering in his eyes. "I don't have a choice, Poppypool! You weren't there after the first raid– how desperate everyone was. I knew if I could... if I could keep them on our good side, we might stand a chance."

Poppypool bared her teeth, fury trembling in her voice. "Stand a chance? By selling out your Clanmates? By putting us in more

danger?" She took a step closer, voice dropping to a fierce whisper. "If I see you out here again, if I hear even a whisper about you meeting these rogues, I swear I'll go to Sparrowstar myself."

The rogue let out a harsh laugh. "A shame, really. You're much more interesting than him." He glanced at Pikedive. "Looks like your secrets aren't so safe after all. Better be careful, 'Pikedive', or you'll end up on our bad side after all."

With that, the rogue disappeared into the shadows, leaving Pikedive alone to face Poppypool's wrath.

Pikedive's shoulders slumped, defeat and bitterness etched onto his face as he looked at her. "I'm trying to keep the Clan safe, Poppypool," he murmured, almost pleading. "This... this was my only way."

Poppypool's voice softened, though her gaze remained steely. "If you think this is protecting the Clan, then you've lost sight of what loyalty means. The rogues don't care about us, Pikedive. You're not their ally. You're just a pawn they'll use and discard."

He looked away, saying nothing, shame and bitterness battling within his gaze.

Without another word, Poppypool turned and walked back toward camp, her heart heavy with the knowledge of Pikedive's betrayal. She knew she'd have to tread carefully, but she wouldn't let his treachery go unanswered. GlacierClan needed true loyalty now more than ever– and she's ensure that loyalty would stand firm, no matter the cost.

Chapter 27

As the pale light of dawn crept over the GlacierClan camp, Poppypool found Hickorytree near the camp entrance, his gaze trained on the warriors gathering for the morning patrol. She took a steadying breath, willing herself to stay calm. There was too much at stake to let nerves get in the way.

"Hickorytree," she called softly, stepping up beside him.

He turned, eyebrows raised, noticing the intensity in her expression. "What is it, Poppypool? Is everything okay?"

She glanced at the small group of cats, most of them stretching and murmuring in a low voice. "I don't think it's a good idea to send them to the upperlands today."

Hickorytree's eyes sharpened, studying her closely. "Why do you say that?"

She hesitated, measuring her words. Telling him about Pikedive's late-night rendezvous felt too risky and too soon, but she had to warn him somehow. "I... I have a feeling the rogues might be lingering in that area, watching and waiting for us to come close." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I think they'll try to catch the patrol off-guard."

Hickorytree's tail flicked, his expression darkening. He looked out over the gathered warriors, assessing how many of the cats he'd might not see alive if the patrol went their scheduled route. "You know, I was thinking the same thing. Something hasn't felt right, and the rogues seem to always be anticipating our next move. We can't afford to take any unnecessary risks."

Relief washed over Poppypool, and she let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. "Thank you, Hickorytree. Truly. I know this might sound strange, but..." She shook her head, stopping short of explaining her encounter with Pikedive. Instead, she met his gaze

with unwavering conviction. "It just doesn't feel safe out there today."

Hickorytree gave a firm nod, his amber eyes flickering with appreciation. "You may have saved some lives today, Poppypool. Sometimes, following instinct is just as important as any plan." He glanced over at the warriors and lifted his voice. "Today, we'll be staying away from the highlands. The patrol's going toward the Gathering Hollow instead- keep your guard up all the same."

The warriors nodded, some of them casting curious glances at Poppypool. She ducked her head slightly, but Hickorytree leaned closer to her.

"Poppypool," he said softly, "I know you've had a difficult time lately, but remember, the Clan needs you. And so do I." He gave her a reassuring flick of his tail. "Your instincts and knowledge are invaluable to us."

She blinked, surprised and touched by his words. "Thank you, Hickorytree," she whispered, her voice thick with gratitude. "I won't let the Clan down. I'll keep trusting my instincts."

With a warm nod, Hickorytree gave her shoulder a light press with his muzzle before he turned to join the patrol. As she watched them go, the tension in her chest eased, her heart filled with a warmth she hadn't felt in moons. Today, for the first time in a while, she felt like her actions had made a good difference.

Hickorytree had given her trust, and with that small gesture, she found a spark of renewed purpose. Watching him lead the patrol in the opposite direction, she silenetly promised to keep her Clan safe- whatever it took.

*****

Poppypool paced by the nursery, glancing at the entrance every few moments. The sounds from within were muffled, but she could make out Newtflake's soft voice and Tawnyheart's muffled responses. She had sent him in alone, trusting that he'd manage, but the anxiety gnawed at her, and she wished he'd emerge with news

soon. She barely noticed Hawkflight approaching until his shadow stretched beside her.

"You're just going to let Newtflake do this alone?" Hawkflight's voice was flat, with a hint of something colder.

Poppypool's ears flicked, but she kept her gaze on the nursery. "Yes. He's capable. We've been over every scenario together, and he knows what to do."

Hawkflight gave a dismissive scoff. "He's just an apprentice, Poppypool. Doesn't matter how well you've trained him- what if something goes wrong?"

She finally turned to face him, irritation sparking in her eyes. "Why do you always doubt me, Hawkflight? Do you think I'd leave him alone if I thought he couldn't handle it?"

Hawkflight's tail flicked, and he glanced away, jaw clenched. "Maybe I doubt that you know what's best for everyone. You've made some... questionable choices before, haven't you?"

"My choices are my own," Poppypool snapped, her temper flaring. "They're not the choices of my apprentice, and you're a fool to doubt his skills when he's been training longer than you ever did." Poppypool's claws dug into the dirt, but she forced herself to take a breath. "And yet, here I am, still trying to make things right," she muttered, her voice low. "Unlike *some* cats who would rather throw stones than consider why I did what I did."

Hawkflight's gaze narrowed as he looked back at her, a muscle in his jaw tightening. "This isn't about you and your mistakes. It's about our Clan, and these kits that Tawnyheart's bringing into it. Aren't you even a little curious about who their father is? Or are you too focused on your own problems?"

Poppypool's eyes narrowed, her patience fraying. "Of course I'm curious. I care about those kits just as much as anyone. I'm only trying to keep my focus where it should be- on helping and healing." She paused, searching his face. "What about you, Hawkflight? Why do you even care so much?"

Hawkflight's gaze hardened, his voice quieter but still laced with tension. "Because those kits deserve to know who they are, who their father is. If he's from outside the Clan, he needs to step forward or leave Tawnyheart alone. She's got enough to handle without anyone abandoning her."

Poppypool felt a pang at his words, sensing something unsaid. "Maybe Tawnyheart chose to keep it to herself for a reason, Hawkflight. And maybe that's something we should respect. These kits... they'll have enough to deal with without our Clan piling on questions about where their father came from."

Hawkflight's shoulders dropped a fraction, but he looked away, voice quieter. "Maybe. Or maybe it's just another mess waiting to happen."

Just then, Newtflake emerged from the nursery, his eyes gleaming with a mix of pride and relief. "They're all healthy," he said, sounding tired but triumphant. "Two kits- a son and a daughter. Tawnyheart is resting."

Poppypool allowed a smile, nodding to Newtflake. "Well done, Newtflake. I knew you'd pull through."

Newtflake ducked his head, relief flashing across his face, and disappeared back inside.

Beside her, Hawkflight shifted his paws, but he didn't make any move toward the nursery. After a tense silence, he muttered, "I suppose we'll meet them soon enough."

"Yes, we will," Poppypool replied quietly. "And whatever their past is, they're here now. Part of our Clan, no matter where they came from."

Hawkflight gave a noncommittal grunt, his face unreadable, and they fell silent, both staring at the nursery entrance. Even with all that had happened between them, they shared a moment of silent resolve. The kits inside were here to stay, and nothing could change that now.

Chapter 28

The silence of the night was shattered by a piercing yowl. Poppypool's eyes flew open, her heart pounding as shrieks of battle erupted outside the medicine den. Cats were screeching, the sounds of claws raking fur and flesh filling the night. She barely had a moment to process the attack when the scent of blood and rogues hit her full force. They were attacking the camp again.

"Stay here!" Poppypool ordered Dusk, who was huddled in a corner, trembling with wide, fearful eyes. But before she could shield them, a hulking rogue tom burst into the den, his eyes glinting with a cruel intent as he advanced on them, lips curled into a snarl.

Poppypool squared herself, a fierce protectiveness flaring in her chest. "You're not getting past me," she growled, lowering herself, claws unsheathing.

The rogue laughed, a cold, mocking sound. "You're just a healer. Step aside, and I might let you off easy."

"Try me," she spat, lunging forward to swipe at his face. Her claws raked his muzzle, and the tom reeled back with a furious snarl, blood dripping from his nose. He retaliated swiftly, claws slashing across her shoulder. Poppypool gasped, a fiery pain ripping through her, but she held her ground, standing firmly between him and Dusk.

"Get away from them!" she hissed, backing the rogue toward the den entrance. With a final, furious swipe that left a deep gouge on his flank, she drove him out, her breathing ragged but steady. The rogue stumbled back, hissing in frustration before vanishing into the shadows of the camp, leaving her standing guard, bloodied but resolute.

Dusk whimpered from behind her, their small form quivering. "They've found me... they're here because of me. I– I never should

have stayed..."

Poppypool turned, pressing her nose to Dusk's head gently. "You're not alone in this anymore, Dusk. I'll protect you, no matter what."

Dusk's eyes glistened, fear and gratitude warring in their gaze, and they pressed closer to her side. "I... thank you."

Outside, the sounds of battle were dying down, the victorious yowls of the rogues echoing in the chilling silence that followed. Poppypool and Dusk emerged from the den, surveying the devastation.

The camp was a nightmare. Bodies lay strewn across the clearing, dens were shredded, and the acrid scent of blood hung thick in the air. Poppypool's heart twisted painfully as she spotted Cedarpelt's lifeless form beside the entrance, his eyes fixed and sightless, his body still.

"No... not Cedarpelt," she murmured, her voice breaking. She felt Dusk's soft nudge, grounding her.

Nearby, Hickorytree was crouched beside the nursery, sobbing, his voice a guttural, heart-wrenching sound. The realization struck Poppypool like ice: one of the kits was missing.

Poppypool approached, her legs trembling. "Hickorytree," she said softly, her voice thick with grief. "What happened?"

Hickorytree looked up, his face streaked with tears. "Th-they took her," he sobbed, sniffling uncontrollably. "Th-they took Magpiekit..." he choked out, his voice barely above a whisper.

Poppypool felt her claws dig into the earth as fury and despair swelled inside her. "They dared to steal one of our kits?" She turned, her eyes blazing. "This isn't just a skirmish. They're trying to destroy us."

Nearby, warriors were regrouping, their faces hollow with shock and grief as they assessed the damage. Hawkflight was pressing a paw to a wound on Sorrelfur's side, his face a mask of barely-contained rage.

Hawkflight caught Poppypool's eye, his voice low and venomous. "This ends here, Poppypool. No more mercy. If they're willing to take our kits, we have no choice but to fight back. Hard."

Poppypool met his gaze, the same fire smoldering within her. "Then let's make sure they understand that GlacierClan won't fall without a fight. We're not just defending ourselves now– we're taking back what's ours."

Dusk pressed close to her, their voice small and haunted. "They won't stop, you know. Not until every one of us is gone." They looked up, trembling but resolute. "But... I'll fight. If you'll have me, I'll fight."

Poppypool rested her tail on their shoulder, her heart swelling with pride. "You're one of us now, Dusk. You'll always have a place here. And together, we'll make sure those rogues regret ever crossing GlacierClan."

*****

As dawn's first light struggled through the mist hanging over GlacierClan's destroyed camp, Poppypool raised her voice, calling the Clan together. Her voice cut through the quiet, brittle and edged with the pain every cat in camp shared. The Clan gathered, their eyes dull with grief but underlined with a cold, simmering anger. Sparrowstar stood beside her, shoulders heavy with loss but eyes sharp with determination.

Once all were present, Poppypool stepped forward. "Last night, we suffered more than any Clan should," she began, her tone unwavering despite the raw sorrow in her eyes. "The rogues attacked us, tearing apart our camp, stealing prey– and taking one of our own."

A horrified gasp rose from the crowd. Murmurs began to stir among them, low growls and upset whispers as the Clan processed her words.

Poppypool let the silence settle before continuing. "Magpiekit is

gone, taken by the rogues while they destroyed our home. They stole a helpless kit, not because they needed one, but to hurt us, to tear us apart." She lifted her head, eyes blazing as she addressed them. "But they've made a terrible mistake."

Hickorytree, standing near the nursery entrance, looked hollowed out, his eyes rimmed with grief as he listened. Poppypool met his gaze, and the rawness of his pain seared her heart. She lowered her voice, the intensity wavering. "We will not stand by and allow this. Tonight, we take back what's ours. We will ambush the rogues in their camp and drive them out of our lives."

A shuffling at the back of the crowd caught her attention. Dusk stood there, their small form shadowed in the early light. Despite their quiet stance, their eyes glowed with intensity. "I know their camp. I know where they post their guards and how they arrange their patrols," Dusk said, voice low but steady. "If we plan it right, we can catch them off guard, retrieve Magpiekit, and end their threat once and for all."

Several Clan cats exchanged uneasy glances, but Poppypool raised her tail for silence. She nodded. "We're lucky to have Dusk with us. They've given us the knowledge we need to strike at the rogues before they come for us again."

Sparrowstar took a step forward, and the Clan grew silent, sensing the gravity of what she was about to say. "Before we act, we must honor our fallen. Cedarpelt, Adderseed, Crouchmist, Mayshade, Otterfire, Petalfire, and Fawnstripe fought with everything they had. They died protecting us." Her voice wavered, and she took a shaky breath. "Their spirits watch over us now, but their absence leave a void in this Clan."

The Clan dipped their heads, sorrowful murmurs drifting through the still air. After a beat, Sparrowstar went on, her voice now a mere whisper, like the wind over an empty moor. "Tonight, we'll hold a vigil to remember them and all they gave to GlacierClan. But first, we must strike back. This won't end until we make it clear GlacierClan is not to be crossed."

Hawkflight, who had been silently watching, stepped forward, his

gaze sharp. "Then let's go. Let's make them pay for every life they've taken."

Sparrowstar nodded, but her gaze was steady and focused. "Before we move on the rogues, we'll need support. DawnClan needs to know what's happened, and we need them to stand with us." She looked to Poppypool. "We'll meet with Emberstar before the Gathering and see if he'll join our cause."

Poppypool inclined her head, her expression set. "Emberstar has to understand the danger we're all in. If DawnClan and GlacierClan stand together, we can wipe out the rogues for good."

Sparrowstar flicked her tail, signaling the end of the meeting. "Poppypool, I trust you to gather a patrol and meet with DawnClan." She looked around at the Clan. "The rest of you, prepare yourselves. Our camp is defenseless no longer."

Poppypool turned and, with a flick of her tail, called out, "Hawkflight, Hickorytree, Pikedive, Dusk– you'll join me in reaching out to DawnClan. Every moment counts."

The group nodded, determination settling over their features as they headed for the camp entrance. Hickorytree brushed past Poppypool, a shadow of hope flickering in his eyes. She leaned in close, her voice low. "We'll bring her back, Hickorytree. I promise."

He looked at her, his gratitude silent but evident. "Thank you, Poppypool."

With one last look at the battered camp, Poppypool stepped out, leading her patrol toward DawnClan. The weight of every life lost and every promise made pressed on her shoulders, but her resolve was unwavering. This fight would end– one way or another.

Chapter 29

The GlacierClan entered Emberstar's den, the thick scent of herbs blending with DawnClan's earthy, pine-rich scent. Poppypool dipped her head in greeting to the powerful tortoiseshell leader, who sat in the center of the room, his purple eyes solemn yet fiercely determined. Around him sat Gingerheart, his broad-shouldered deputy, and his medicine cats– Splashnose, Sunnyshine, and Orchidfern– all of whom watched the GlacierClan cats with a mixture of sympathy and steely resolved.

Emberstar rose to his paws, nodding respectfully to Poppypool and her patrol. "You're welcome here, and we share your grief," he began, his voice low yet carrying a quiet strength. "When I heard the rogues had attacked your camp, I knew we couldn't wait until the Gathering. DawnClan will stand with you, Poppypool. We won't let those rogues threaten the Clans any longer."

Relief flooded through Poppypool, but her heart was still heavy as she met Emberstar's gaze. "Thank you, Emberstar. GlacierClan has suffered at their claws for moons, but last night was a new low. They tore apart our camp, killed some of our best warriors, and... they took Magpiekit." Her voice faltered, and she took a steadying breath. "We need your strength to drive them out for good."

Emberstar's expression hardened, his claws kneading the ground. "No kit should be taken from their family. We'll make sure the rogues pay for every life and every ounce of grief they've caused."

Poppypool lowered her head, barely able to keep her composure. "Thank you," she murmured. "This has to end. GlacierClan has lost too many."

The den fell silent as Emberstar glanced at his medicine cats, who nodded their agreement. Splashnose spoke up, her eyes blazing with determination. "We've already gathered herbs and poultices, knowing there may be more injuries. GlacierClan's wounds are ours to tend."

Beside her, Sunnyshine dipped her head, adding, "Our duty is to protect all of the Clans, even if it means fighting alongside them."

Orchidfern stepped forward, her gaze steady on Poppypool. "Let your Clanmates know they'll be well cared for. DawnClan has the strength and resources to stand with you."

Emberstar placed his tail on Gingerheart's shoulder. "We'll send a group of our strongest warriors with you to raid the rogue camp. They won't see it coming– and they won't leave unscathed." His voice dropped to a determined growl. "GlacierClan deserves peace. We all do."

Poppypool's heart ached with gratitude. "Thank you, Emberstar. This means more to us than I can say."

Gingerheart nodded firmly, meeting her gaze. "When it comes time to fight, we'll be by your side. I'll be there too. The rogues won't know what hit them."

Emberstar's eyes narrowed with resolve. "Tell Sparrowstar we'll be ready at sundown. Together, DawnClan and GlacierClan will drive the rogues out once and for all."

Poppypool bowed her head deeply. "I'll deliver your message, and I know Sparrowstar will be relieved to hear it."

As they turned to leave, Emberstar's voice called out once more. "And Poppypool?"

She turned back, meeting his solemn gaze.

"If there's one thing I know, it's that rogues don't last long when the Clans unite." He gaze her a curt nod, his jaw set with determination. "We won't stop until they're gone."

With a final glance back at the DawnClan cats, Poppypool and her patrol left the den, hearts filled with a renewed sense of hope and strength. Emberstar's words echoed in her mind– together, they would end this once and for all.

*****

The GlacierClan patrol trekked through the quiet, shadow-draped moorland, the devastation of the camp raid weighing on each of them. Even the stars seemed to sense their urgency, twinkling coldly overhead as the cats walked silently beneath them.

Poppypool's thoughts raced, replaying the chaotic images of their ruined camp and the broken forms of her Clanmates lying still under the stars. Ahead, Pikedive moved with tense steps, his head down as if he wanted to disappear into the shadows. Swallowing her nerves, she picked up her pace to walk beside him.

"Pikedive," she murmured, keeping her voice low enough that the other cats wouldn't hear. His ears twitched, but he didn't turn to face her, so she continued. "Tell me the truth. Did you tell the rogues to come in the night and attack us?"

At that, he finally looked up, his green eyes wide with alarm. "No! StarClan, no, Poppypool!" His voice cracked. "I wouldn't– how could you even think–" He took a shaky breath, looking away. "I never would have suggested that, let alone... told them to take Magpiekit. I swear on every one of our Clanmates' lives."

Poppypool held his gaze, searching for even a hint of doubt, but all she found was desperation and fear. "You may not have suggested it, but you've still fed them information," she replied softly. "You thought you were protecting us by working with them, but you've put us all in more danger. Look at what they've done to us. You can't tell me this is the Clan you hoped to protect."

Pikedive's tail lashed with frustration, his head lowering. "I thought I was keeping the rogues off our backs, trying to keep us safe by giving them just enough so they wouldn't take more." He paused, voice barely more than a whisper. "But I never thought they'd kill our own, or take one of our kits... they didn't tell me that was the plan." He shook his head, shoulders tensing. "It's my fault. I should have known they'd go this far. I was a fool to trust them."

Poppypool narrowed her eyes. "You're right. You were a fool. But now, if you truly regret it, you have one chance to make things right." Her voice grew hard, each word a sharp reminder of his actions. "If you have any love left for GlacierClan, you'll fight with

us. You'll put every ounce of strength you have into defending what's left of our Clan."

He looked up, his gaze filled with something akin to defiance, but it faded quickly to grim determination. "I will. I swear I'll fight like a lion. I'll make sure they never touch GlacierClan again."

"And if you betray us again..." Her voice trailed off, and she held his gaze, letting the weight of her unspoken warning settle heavily between them.

Pikedive swallowed, his eyes shadowed but unwavering. "I won't. You have my word, Poppypool. I'll fight until there's nothing left in me. And if StarClan wants to take me down for what I've done... then so be it."

She watched him, considering his words. She saw the guilt in his eyes, the fear in his voice. It was the first time he'd seemed truly aware of the cost of his actions, and though it didn't erase his betrayal, it stirred a flicker of hope. GlacierClan couldn't afford to turn away any cat who was willing to stand and fight for them now.

With a sigh, she nodded, keeping her tone measured. "Then prove it to me, Pikedive. When we face them, I expect you to stand by our side with everything you have." Her voice softened, just slightly. "Not just for the Clan, but for yourself. If you want to make things right, this is your chance."

Pikedive blinked, his gaze locking onto hers with a fierce intensity. "I'll do it, Poppypool. I'll fight with everything I have, and I'll take down any rogue who dares touch our home again."

She inclined her head, accepting his promise. "Good. Because I'll be watching." She paused, her gaze flicking up to the night sky as she sent a silent prayer to StarClan. *Please, let him mean it. Let him be willing to fight to protect us. Let him help us end this.*

With that, she fell back into her place, letting Pikedive move ahead. She could only hope at his newfound resolve would hold strong when the battle came, for GlacierClan's survival depended on it.

Chapter 30

The GlacierClan camp was silent as dawn broke, the first lights creeping over the horizon. Every face was tense, every breath held. Cats from both DawnClan and GlacierClan formed a half-circle around Dusk, whose amber eyes gleamed with a mix of nervousness and determination as they stood before the gathered warriors.

Emberstar, tall and composed with his warm gaze steady, exchanged a glance with Sparrowstar. The two leaders seemed to share an unspoken understanding that this would be a battle unlike any they'd faced before. Poppypool stood between them, her gaze on Dusk, willing strength into the young rogue as they began to speak.

"Alright," Dusk said, clearing their throat. Their voice wavered slightly at first, but grew steadier as they continued. "The rogue camp is nestled between two large pine trees and some dense brush. They've posted guards at the entrance and at the back, though they swap places regularly to keep fresh eyes on each position."

Dusk raised a paw to point in the direction of the rogue camp. "At dawn and dusk, they switch out for a new set of guards, and that's when their camp is at its most vulnerable. The hunting patrols will be out around then as well, stretching their numbers even thinner." They met the eyes of the assembled cats. "That's when you should attack."

Sparrowstar nodded thoughtfully. "How many guards do they usually have posted?"

"Usually two at the entrance and one at the back," Dusk replied, then hesitated. "But the ones posted at the entrance are some of their best fighters– Ridge and Vine."

The names drew a tense silence from the crowd, and several cats exchanged uneasy glances. Ridge was a rogue known for her ruthless precision in battle, and Vine was infamous for her cruel

taunts and sadistic attacks. Poppypool noticed Newtflake's fur bristling at the mention of Vine, his eyes narrowing with unspoken anger.

Emberstar spoke up, his tone calm but understanding. "We'll need a clear plan to deal with Ridge and Vine. We can't let them hold us up at the entrance– they'll need to be dealt with quickly if we're to reach the heart of the camp."

"Agreed," Sparrowstar replied, glancing to Poppypool and Hickorytree. "Hickorytree, Poppypool, I want you with Dusk leading the strike from the back. If we can create enough chaos within the camp while the entrance is overwhelmed, we'll throw them off balance."

Poppypool nodded, feeling a mix of nerves and determination. "We'll handle it, Sparrowstar," she said firmly, exchanging a look with Hickorytree. Dusk gave her a tense smile, nodding as they drew comfort from the support around them.

Sunnyshine spoke up, her voice calm but steady. "We'll be bringing as many supplies as we can manage here to treat injuries, but if you're hurt– don't push yourself. Get to us."

Poppypool dipped her head to the DawnClan medicine cats. "Thank you, Sunnyshine. With all of us together, we have a chance to end this."

Emberstar took a deep breath and looked across the faces of both Clans. "Remember: we fight to kill, not just injure. These rogues have left us no other choice. They've killed Clanmates, taken a kit, and destroyed GlacierClan's camp. If they stand in your way– strike them down."

Hickorytree lifted his chin, his voice strong and resolute. "The safety of our Clans depends on this. We can't show them mercy."

Dusk's eyes dropped to the ground, and their voice was barely a whisper. "I know... I know it's hard to think this way. But they won't hesitate to kill any of you."

Poppypool reached over, placing her tail on Dusk's shoulder in silent support. "You've given us everything we need to make this work, Dusk. Without you, we'd be fighting blind."

Dusk swallowed, glancing at her with gratitude. "Thank you, Poppypool. I just... I want this nightmare to end– for all of us."

With the plan solidified, Emberstar nodded solemnly. "This ends tonight," he vowed, his words carrying a weight that settled over them all like a cold frost. He raised his tail, signaling the end of the meeting. "Prepare yourself, gather what strength you can, and let's make sure we leave no room for doubt. We fight to reclaim what's ours."

A murmur of agreement rippled through the crowd. As the cats began to disperse, Poppypool turned to Newtflake, catching a simmering tension in his gaze.

"Newtflake," she murmured, "remember, we're all in this together. Keep your wits about you. The rogues are ruthless, but we're stronger together."

He nodded, some of the fire in his eyes dimming, replaced by a determined calm. "I'll be ready, Poppypool. For GlacierClan."

As the rays of light stretched overhead, Poppypool felt nervous. Cats were intermingling, the two Clans sharing tongues, prey, and swapping stories from their lives. She smiled, seeing as even the morning of the battle, peace was established even temporarily between the rival Clans.

Poppypool closed her eyes briefly, offering a silent prayer to StarClan. *Let us succeed. For GlacierClan, for DawnClan, for every cat we've lost... let this be the end.*

*****

In the quiet, sunhigh light, Poppypool sat across from Newtflake and Sparrowstar in the leader's den, her heart pounding as she prepared to voice the choice she'd been turning over for days. Sparrowstar's eyes were on her, calm but questioning, while

Newtflake sat stiffly, his fur slightly ruffled, clearly bracing himself.

Finally, Poppypool took a breath and began. "I want to talk to you both about Dusk."

Sparrowstar's ears flicked with interest, and Newtflake blinked, glancing sideways at Poppypool. "What about them?" he asked, his voice cautious.

"Since they joined us," Poppypool went on, "they've proven their loyalty. They risked their life to share information about the rogues, and every time they've been asked to help, they've done it without hesitation. I think... I think they're more than just a rogue who wandered in." She held Newtflake's gaze, seeing a flicker of surprise and tension in his eyes. "I believe Dusk could be a valuable member of the Clan. And I'd like them to join our den as a medicine cat apprentice."

Sparrowstar's eyes widened slightly, but she didn't interrupt. Newtflake, however, stared at Poppypool, his mouth slightly open. "You mean... you want *me* to train them?" he asked, his voice rising with a note of disbelief. "Poppypool, I'm not ready to train an apprentice, especially not Dusk!"

Poppypool dipped her head, calm and steady. "I understand this is a big step, Newtflake. But with the way things are, we need all the help we can get. Dusk has shown a real interest in herbs, and–"

"But why not you?" Newtflake interrupted, his voice wavering. "You're the one they trust; they know you better. You should be the one to guide them, Poppypool. I'm... I'm just..." he trailed off, his eyes etched with worry.

Poppypool leaned forward, her voice gentle but firm. "Because there's no guarantee I'll come back after this battle, Newtflake. We have no way of knowing what might happen. If I'm not here, GlaicierClan will need a fully trained medicine cat and an apprentice in training. I need to make sure the Clan has more than one set of paws to rely on."

A silence fell, heavy and cold. Newtflake's face paled, his eyes wide

with shock. "Don't talk like that," he whispered, his voice cracking. "Of course you'll come back."

Poppypool's gaze softened. "I'll fight as hard as I can to return, Newtflake. But if StarClan calls me..." She blinked, glancing at the ground. "I need to make sure you'll be alright, that the Clan will be alright. You've proven that you're ready. You've handled every challenge, every injured cat, and you've done so with compassion and skill. You're ready for this."

Newtflake looked away, his shoulders slumping as if he was carrying the weight of the moorland. "I can't... I'm not you, Poppypool," he said, his voice barely a whisper. "I can't lead the medicine den on my own. What if I make a mistake? What if someone gets hurt?"

Sparrowstar, who had been silent all this time, finally spoke. "Newtflake, I've seen your dedication and skill with my own eyes. You've saved lives, and your Clanmates respect and trust you. I trust you." She paused, her yellow gaze gentle. "And Dusk– they've shown nothing but loyalty. I'll give them a chance to become a full member of GlacierClan after the battle. But it's your heart and skill that will show them what it means to truly belong here."

Newtflake's gaze flickered between Poppypool and Sparrowstar, his eyes glassy. "But... I don't know if I can do it alone." His voice shook, and he looked at Poppypool desperately. "What if I let everyone down?"

Poppypool stepped closer, pressing her forehead to his, her voice warm and steady. "You're never going to be alone, Newtflake. I'll be watching over you, no matter what happens. You're strong, you're capable, and you're needed. Your Clan is counting on you, and I know you won't let them down."

Newtflake closed his eyes, a shuddering breath escaping him as he leaned into Poppypool's touch. "I just... I never thought I'd have to do this without you."

"You won't be," she whispered. "I'll be here, either beside you or in StarClan, guiding you as best I can. You're ready for this."

Newtflake drew back, blinking rapidly as he fought back tears. He nodded, his voice barely a whisper. "Thank you, Poppypool. I'll... I'll do my best."

Poppypool nodded, then looked at Sparrowstar, who met her gaze with a solemn, determined expression.

"Then it's settled," Sparrowstar said quietly. "We'll formally accept Dusk as part of GlacierClan once this battle is over. And Newtflake, you'll have all the support you need, both from me and Poppypool. GlacierClan has always thrived because of its resilience, and you're part of that strength."

Newtflake took a deep breath, nodding as a hint of determination appeared in his eyes. "I won't let you down. I'll do whatever it takes."

Poppypool rested her tail across his shoulders, feeling a swell of pride. "I know you will, Newtflake."

Chapter 31

Night drew near and Poppypool felt her anxiety and fear rise. Sitting outside her den whilst the other medicine cats prepared herbs, she watched the DawnClan and GlacierClan warriors mingling. She recognized a few– Tornface, Stoneblaze, and Mistflight– but there were also young cats amongst them. A gaggle of bright-eyed apprentices ready to fight for peace. So young, so innocent, so oblivious to the weight of the battle that waited for them once night fell.

How many of them would return to their nests? The thought startled her as she let out a sigh, her shoulders slumping. *Some of these cats have been around since Nightstar's reign. Would they survive this battle to tell to younger generations?* Her gaze slid to where Hickorytree and his remaining kits sat outside the nursery, entertaining some of the other cats with their antics. A gaping hole seemed missing from the family with Magpiekit gone. Poppypool didn't like it. She'd never admit it to any cat, but Magpiekit was her favorite from the litter.

"Lost in thought again?" Hawkflight's scent gave him away before he spoke, sitting down beside his sister and watching the Clans.

Poppypool didn't look at him, fearful that she'd burst into tears at the thought of not seeing him again. "Are we going to see half of these cats at the next Gathering?" she whispered, eyeing the apprentices as they were chased by the kits. "Will those apprentices live to become warriors? Have families of their own? Grow into elders?"

Hawkflight blinked, his eyes flashing with confusion. "Did you think about that when this all started?" The words seemed to tumble out of his mouth before he could stop them, and he looked shocked at himself.

The anger she'd usually have felt at something like that didn't come. Instead, it was replaced with the familiar guilt and despair she'd grown accustomed to. "I don't think I'll be allowed into StarClan,"

she rasped, her voice hoarse with sudden emotion. She turned to her brother, her eyes brimming with tears as he watched her. "I– I've tried so hard to redeem myself. I brought Dusk here, I've been helping Hickorytree with the kits, I'm helping in the battle as a warrior instead of as a healer... But it doesn't feel like enough." She wrapped her tail around herself, feeling as though the world was caving in on her. "What if I don't make it into StarClan?"

Hawkflight didn't seem to know how to respond, staying quiet for a long moment. He wrapped a paw around her shoulders and pulled her into his chest, resting his chin on her head. Poppypool breathed in his familiar scent, possibly for the last time. Her breathing was shallow and ragged, tears spilling over as everything she'd been feeling for the last moons exploded.

Poppypool clung to her brother, wrapped her forepaws around him and burying her face into his feather-soft fur. Her body shuddered as sobs wracked her, so intense that she nearly fell over.

The quiet murmur of cats faded as Poppypool sobbed, her emotions spilling over with a force she hadn't known she'd been holding back. Hawkflight said nothing, his warm paw steady on her shoulders, offering a silent strength she desperate needed. He pressed his cheek against her head, his breath soft and steady, grounding her even as her heart felt like it was unraveling.

"Shh... Poppypool, it's alright," he murmured, his voice barely above a whisper. "You've done more for the Clan than any of us. You've spent every waking moment trying to make things right."

She lifted her head, her tear-streaked face turning up to meet his gaze, her words shaky. "But what if it's not enough? What if... what if StarClan judges me for my mistakes, no matter how much I try?"

Hawkflight's yellow eyes softened. "Poppypool, StarClan knows the heart behind your actions. They'll see everything you've done to protect GlacierClan, to protect the cats you love." He paused, searching her face. "I'm... sorry I pushed you away and left you to deal with this alone."

Poppypool took a shaky breath, still clinging to his words. "I just... I

want to be forgiven, Hawkflight. I want to believe that I've earned my place beside those I've lost."

Hawkflight's gaze was unflinching, his voice firm. "You will. And if anyone deserves peace, it's you." He hesitated, then added softly, "Besides, you're not going anywhere tonight, alright? We're going to fight, and we're going to win. GlacierClan still needs you– *I* still need you."

His conviction melted something within her, and she managed a faint smile, even as fresh tears blurred her vision. She leaned against him, feeling a weight lift, however slightly. Hawkflight's presence was like a balm, steadying her, reminding her of the bonds she'd built and the love that rooted her to GlacierClan.

After a moment, he spoke again, more determined. "Come on, you should get some rest before we head out. You've prepared for this as best you can, and you'll have me right by your side."

Poppypool nodded, wiping her tears and taking a deep breath. She looked around, eyes lingering on the young warriors and apprentices gathered in eager clusters, sharing last words and stolen moments. Her gaze settled on Hickorytree and his kits, the ache of Magpiekit's absence palpable even from a distance.

She pulled herself together, her voice steadier. "You're right. For the Clan, for Magpiekit... for every cat that deserves a safer life." She met her brother's gaze. "We'll see this through."

Just then, Sparrowstar approached them, her yellow eyes shining with quiet resolve. "Poppypool, Hawkflight, I wanted to speak to both of you before the patrols gather," she said, her tone soft yet commanding. "Poppypool, you've done everything you can to prepare us. And if anything happens, know that your dedication to the Clan has been seen and deeply appreciated."

Poppypool's throat tightened, but she managed to nod. "Thank you, Sparrowstar. I... I only want what's best for GlacierClan. And tonight, that means making sure Magpiekit and every cat can finally sleep without fear."

Sparrowstar held her gaze. "Then let's end this. GlacierClan won't stand alone tonight. DawnClan's warriors are with us, and StarClan's strength flows through every one of us." Her eyes flicked to Hawkflight. "We fight will all we have, and we bring our Clan back together."

As Sparrowstar padded off to organize the groups, Hawkflight nudged Poppypool's shoulder. "Come on, let's make sure we're ready. Together, like always."

With one last look at the Clan they'd sworn to protect, Poppypool took a deep breath and steadied herself. She and Hawkflight stepped forward to join their Clanmates, the weight of the coming battle heavy on her heart, but tempered by a fierce resolve and the comfort of her brother at her side. Whatever lay ahead, they would face it as one.

Chapter 32

Dusk's paws tingled as they stood in the tall grass just beyond the rogue camp, their heart pounding in time with the murmuring of the wind. GlacierClan and DawnClan warriors were crouched all around, hidden in the shadows. The camp looked deceptively still in the moonlight, but Dusk knew better. Somewhere beyond that wall of brambles, the rogues would be stirring, tense and wary in their stolen territory. Dusk swallowed hard, feeling the familiar prick of fear– but they were no rogue now. GlacierClan was their home, and Magpiekit needed them.

Poppypool leaned in close, her eyes sharp and serious. "Dusk, you know where Magpiekit is being held?"

Dusk nodded, though their voice trembled. "In an alcove near their sleeping den. There's always one guard stationed close by... but we'll need to be quick."

Hickorytree gave a quiet growl of determination, his gaze flicking toward the bramble entrance. "Then we make it quick. GlacierClan won't lose another life tonight."

They crept around the edge of the camp, each pawstep painfully slow and deliberate as they moved into position at the back entrance. Dusk's senses were on high alert, and when they spotted the guard– a tall, wiry rogue with a torn ear– they instinctively dropped into a crouch.

Hawkflight's eyes met Dusk's, and with a nod from Poppypool, the group launched forward. Dusk's fear vanished in the heat of battle, replaced with a steely resolve. The rogue turned in alarm, but Poppypool was on him first, knocking him off balance with a powerful shove. Hickorytree came next, his claws flashing as he grappled the guard to the ground. The rogue snarled and writhed, but with Dusk and Hawkflight joining the fray, it wasn't long before he fell silent, dead.

The air vibrated with distant yowls as the main group surged into the camp, and Dusk knew it was time. Slipping away from the others, they sprinted through the camp's outskirts, darting through shadows and keeping low to the ground. The moonlight glinted off bramble walls, creating harsh shadows that danced over Dusk as they reached the alcove.

There, huddled and shivering, was Magpiekit. Her wide eyes fixed on Dusk, and she let out a terrified squeak, backing up until she was pressed against the wall of her makeshift prison.

"Magpiekit," Dusk whispered urgently, their voice as soft as they could make it. "It's me, Dusk. I'm here to get you out."

The tiny kit blinked, her fear melting into a glimmer of recognition.

Dusk felt a pang in their chest at how small and frightened she looked, but they forced themselves to stay steady, lowering themselves to her level. "Yes, it's me. I'm taking you back to GlacierClan, alright? Just follow me– stay close."

Magpiekit crept toward them hesitantly, still eyeing the shadows with suspicion. Dusk nudged her gently with their nose. "You're safe now. I won't let anyone hurt you."

With Magpiekit pressed close to their side, Dusk began to weave back through the camp, keeping their senses sharp. The battle was raging on the far side, yowls and snarls filling the night air as the Clan cats fought to secure their victory. But Dusk wasn't about to let their guard down.

Just as they reached the edge of the camp, a rogue stepped into their path, his eyes gleaming with cruel delight. "Running off with the kit, are you?" he sneered, his tail lashing. "I knew you'd turn traitor, Dusk."

Dusk shielded Magpiekit with their body, their fur bristling as they met the rogue's gaze. "GlacierClan is my home now," they spat, their voice fierce. "I'd rather be a traitor than let you hurt this kit."

The rogue lunged, but Dusk darted to the side, delivering a sharp

swipe to his muzzle that sent him reeling back with a hiss. They twisted around, guiding Magpiekit to the side and nudging her forward. "Go, Magpiekit!" they urged, voice tight. "Run to Hawkflight– he'll get you home."

With a scared nod, Magpiekit scurried off, her small paws beating across the ground as she disappeared into the shadows. Dusk's relief was short-lived, though, as the rogue lunged at them again, snarling with rage. As their ruthless training kicked in, Dusk fought back with every ounce of strength they had, ducking and swiping, the clang of claws on fur and the searing pain of a scratch across their shoulder filling their senses.

Just when they thought they couldn't hold their own any longer, another flash of fur came barreling into the rogue, knocking him aside. It was Hickorytree, his eyes blazing as he took over the fight.

"Go, Dusk! I'll handle him," he growled, his claws digging into the ground as he squared off against the rogue.

Dusk hesitated for only a heartbeat, gratitude surging in their chest. They nodded to Hickorytree and then turned, sprinting after Magpiekit. As they ran, they caught a glimpse of Poppypool battling fiercely alongside another tom, their movements a blur of strength and skill against the rogues. The battle was slowly tipping in GlacierClan's favor, but Dusk knew they couldn't let their guard down until every last rogue was driven out.

Reaching the edge of the moor where Hawkflight stood waiting, Magpiekit safely tucked between his paws, Dusk let out a breath they hadn't realized they'd been holding.

"You did it, Dusk," Hawkflight said, his voice filled with pride. "You got her out."

Dusk's chest heaved as they caught their breath, the weight of what they'd done settling on them. "I couldn't let them keep her," they panted, looking down at Magpiekit, who blinked up at them with wide, relieved eyes.

She squeaked at them, pressing close to Hawkflight. Dusk felt a

fierce protectiveness surge through them– a love for the Clan they'd chosen that ran deeper than they'd ever imagined.

The battle still raged on in the camp, but with Magpiekit safe, Dusk knew they'd found their true place in GlacierClan.

Chapter 33

Dusk ran back into the chaos of battle, paws barely touching the ground as they dodged flying claws and lashing tails. The air was thick with snarls and cries, but in the midst of it, a familiar pelt caught their eye. Reed, his light gray fur bristling, was charging toward them, eyes narrowed with fierce determination.

Dusk skidded to a halt, heart thudding. Reed was the last cat they wanted to face– he was the only one who'd been anything close to their friend, the only one who had made living with the rogues bearable. And now, here they were, on opposite sides of a fight that had torn apart everything they'd ever known.

"Reed!" Dusk cried, a pleading note in their voice as they raised a paw in a gesture of peace. "Please, don't do this. You don't have to fight for them. Think about it– this isn't the life you deserve!"

Reed slowed, his claws scraping the ground as he faltered. "Dusk..." His voice was torn, wavering between anger and confusion. "Why? Why are you fighting for GlacierClan? After everything we went through, after all the moons we survived together?"

Dusk felt a surge of desperation, stepping closer. "Because there's more to life than what Gravel and the others taught us. You don't have to live in fear and anger. You could have a real home, Reed. A family that cares for you. I found that here– you could find that too."

Reed's gaze softened, a hint of longing breaking through his hardened expression. But then he shook his head. "The rogues... they're out for blood, Dusk. They want to destroy GlacierClan because... because of a cat named Rowantail. Gravel says Rowantail visits him in his dreams, telling him to get rid of some GlacierClan cats... especially a cat named Poppypool."

Dusk's breath caught in their throat. "Poppypool? Why would they want to hurt her?" Their voice broke with disbelief. "Poppypool's

the kindest cat I've ever known. She took me in when I had nowhere to go. She made me feel safe, Reed! She could do the same for you. You don't have to follow Gravel. You can be free– you can fight with us."

Reed's eyes softened further, the resolve in his face cracking as he took a step back. "I... I don't know, Dusk. I was raised by Gravel, just as you were. I owe him everything." He glanced over his shoulder, as if searching for answers in the chaos. "But you... you seem different, like you finally found what you were looking for."

Before Reed could say more, a harsh, mocking voice boomed over the battle, freezing them both in place. "Well, well. Look who's come crawling back," Gravel sneered, emerging from the shadows with a twisted, blood-soaked grin on his face. "After all we did for you, Dusk. After we took you in, fed you, protected you when your mother left you to die."

Dusk felt a flicker of fear at Gravel's words, but they stood their ground, bristling with defiance. "The only thing you ever taught me was fear. I have a home now, Gravel– a real home. I won't go back to your lies."

Gravel's eyes flashed with fury as he took a menacing step closer. "And yet, here you are, fighting for these Clan cats as if they'd welcome you for good." His gaze shifted to Reed, and Dusk saw their friend shrink under Gravel's glare. "Are you really going to betray us, Reed? Betray me?"

Dusk turned back to Reed, feeling the urgency build in their chest. "You don't owe him anything, Reed. He used you, just like he used me. But here, with GlacierClan, we can build something better. You don't have to keep fighting for a cat who'll throw you away the moment you slip up."

Reed's face twisted with conflict, his claws digging into the ground as he stared between Dusk and Gravel. Dusk held his gaze, trying to convey every ounce of hope, every dream of freedom they'd found in GlacierClan.

Gravel's sneer grew, his voice low and venomous. "You've gotten

soft, Dusk. Just like the Clan cats you've decided to crawl to." His gaze hardened, cold as stone. "You and Poppypool will both pay for your betrayal. Rowantail told me as much."

Dusk bared their teeth, fear melting into anger. "Poppypool has done nothing but help others. You're the one tearing lives apart. This ends now, Gravel. I won't let you hurt anyone else."

Reed took a step forward, glancing between Dusk and Gravel, his expression now full of uncertainty. "Maybe... maybe Dusk is right," he muttered, almost to himself. "Maybe we deserve a chance to live without all this hatred."

Gravel's face twisted with contempt, and he let out a growl. "So, you'd betray your own kin, Reed? Then you're no better than the traitor standing in front of you."

The words stung Reed, but he lifted his head, the strength of Dusk's plea resounding in his eyes. "I choose my own path, Gravel," he said, voice steady. "I'll fight for something real."

Dusk felt a surge of relief, warmth flooding through them as they gave Reed a small nod. Together, they faced Gravel, ready to stand for a future free from his shadow.

*****

Poppypool's limbs burned with exhaustion, her paws weighed down by grief as she surveyed the battle scene. So many of her Clanmates lay still, their lifeless bodies scattered like fallen leaves across the bloodstained ground. But there was no time to mourn, not yet. Her gaze sharpened as it landed on Dusk and another young rogue– a light gray tom she didn't recognize– standing face-to-face with Gravel. Her heart pounded as Gravel snarled, his cold gaze locked on the two younger cats. She couldn't let them face him alone.

Without a second thought, she sprang into action, closing the distance between them in a heartbeat. Hickorytree joined her, matching her stride with fierce determination. They struck Gravel in tandem, their weight forcing him back from Dusk and the gray

tom, but Gravel hardly budged, shaking them off with a dark laugh.

"Oh, look who decided to join the fun," he sneered, his eyes gleaming as he took in Poppypool. "The little traitor herself. How noble of you, rushing to save these poor kits like you haven't betrayed everyone who trusted you."

Poppypool's eyes narrowed, her voice a low growl. "You know nothing about loyalty, Gravel. You hurt others to feel powerful–only a coward would do that."

Gravel chuckled, sidestepping Hickorytree's claws as he advanced on Poppypool, his gaze predatory. "A coward? Well, at least I'm not pretending to be something I'm not. Unlike you, dear Poppypool, pretending to be oh-so-loyal to GlacierClan when we both know the truth."

Hickorytree's ear twitched, a flicker of confusion in his eyes, but he kept his stance firm. Poppypool couldn't allow Gravel to shake her, not here, not now. "The only liar here is you, Gravel," she spat, darting forward to land a swift blow across his muzzle.

Gravel's lip curled as he blocked her next strike, hissing with dark amusement. "Oh, come now. Why don't you tell Hickorytree about all the little schemes you've kept hidden? Or are you afraid he'll turn on you too?" His gaze darted to Hickorytree, a smirk tugging at his mouth. "Did she tell you, Hickorytree, how many lives she ruined? The betrayals she's hidden under that noble act?"

Hickorytree's eyes flickered with doubt, but he only growled, launching himself at Gravel with renewed ferocity. "You don't know anything about Poppypool," he snarled, latching onto Gravel's shoulder and dragging him backward. "All you know is how to ruin lives!"

Gravel grinned, shaking him off with a powerful twist of his body. "Oh, I know more than you think, Hickorytree. Maybe if you had known her better, you'd see just how much of a traitor she is. GlacierClan's precious healer with a taste for revenge."

"Shut up!" Poppypool lunged at Gravel, claws slashing toward his

throat, but Gravel ducked smoothly, his grin growing wider as he sidestepped her attack.

"Oh, touched a nerve, have I?" he taunted, circling her with a mockingly sympathetic look. "I almost pity you, trying so hard to wash away your sins with little acts of kindness. But you'll never be forgiven, Poppypool. Your Clanmates see you as nothing but a weapon."

Poppypool's breathing came faster, anger and guilt clashing within her. "My Clanmates know who I am. I'm *nothing* like you."

"But we're not so different, are we?" he murmured, his voice a sickly-sweet hiss. "Maybe Hickorytree would see that, too, if he knew all your little secrets." His gaze shifted to Hickorytree. "You don't trust her, do you?"

Hickorytree looked between Gravel and Poppypool, hesitation flickering in his gaze. But he pushed it down, baring his teeth in a snarl as he stepped in front of Poppypool protectively. "I trust her more than I'd ever trust a rat like you."

Gravel rolled his eyes, his smirk unwavering. "Loyal to the end, aren't you? But you should be more careful who you stand by." Before Hickorytree could respond, Gravel lunged at Poppypool, teeth flashing in the moonlight.

She barely had time to react, throwing herself sideways, but his claws raked across her shoulder, tearing into her fur. She hissed in pain, stumbling as her legs wobbled beneath her. Hickorytree leapt at Gravel again, clawing at his side, but Gravel turned on him with brutal speed, raking his claws down Hickorytree's flank.

"You can't protect her forever, Hickorytree," Gravel taunted, his voice a low growl. "All her little allies will fall, one by one."

Dusk and the gray rogue watched nearby, eyes wide, frozen by the intensity of the battle. Poppypool saw their fear and clenched her jaw, summoning her last scraps of strength. She couldn't fail them. Not now.

With a surge of energy, she lunged at Gravel, managing to knock him back a few steps, but he was stronger, more ruthless, with far more experience than she did. He seized the opening, his claws slashing across her chest and, in a flash, his fangs closed around her throat.

Pain exploded through her, her vision blurring as she staggered backward, struggling to breathe. She gasped, feeling warmth trickle down her neck, her legs giving way beneath her as Gravel released her, sneering as he stepped back.

"See you in the Dark Forest, Poppypool," he spat, his eyes gleaming with satisfaction as she sank to the ground.

Chapter 34

Dusk's heart shattered as they saw Poppypool's body crumple. For a moment, they were frozen, staring in horror as the blood pooled around her, seeping into the earth. Then, reality hit them like a storm, and they were by her side in an instant, frantically nudging her, pleading, "No, no, no– Poppypool, you're going to be okay! Stay with me!"

Tears streaming down their face, they pressed their paws over the bite on her neck, trying to desperately prevent the inevitable. "Reed! Help me!" They threw a frantic glance at him, their voice cracking. "Put your paws here– press down hard!"

Reed knelt beside them, shaking but obedient, pressing his paws to her chest with as much pressure as he could manage. His eyes, wide and full of shock, flicked between Dusk and Poppypool, his own emotions storming in his eyes.

Poppypool's eyes fluttered open, weakly, but with a soft smile that broke Dusk's heart. Her voice was barely a whisper, rasping with each shallow breath. "Dusk..." She managed, her gaze settling on them, warm and caring. "You've... you've grown so much. Into such a strong cat..."

Dusk's heart twisted. "Don't talk like that! You're going to make it!" Their voice was raw, desperate. "We'll get you back to camp, and Newtflake will fix you up, and everything will be fine– please, Poppypool!"

Poppypool's eyes softened, a sad smile flickering on her face as she shook her head faintly. "I... I made so many mistakes," she whispered, her voice growing fainter. "But... bringing you to the Clan... it was the best choice I ever made." She paused, gasping, but forcing herself to keep speaking. "I'm... so proud of you."

A broken sob escaped Dusk as they tried to press harder, as if they could force her life back into her with sheer will alone. "No, you

can't leave us! You can't leave me! I still need you, Poppypool– we all need you! Newtflake, Hawkflight– they need you. Please, don't go..."

Poppypool's eyes began to dim, but she managed to lift a paw, reaching it up to Dusk's face. Gently, she touched her nose to theirs, a soft, fleeting moment that held all the care she had for them. "Even... if you can't see me," she murmured, her voice barely audible. "I'll be there, Dusk. Watching... from StarClan."

"No, don't say that! You're not leaving me yet," Dusk sobbed, tears spilling down their cheeks as they tried to keep her with them, paws shaking with desperation. "Please, Poppypool, stay... just a little longer..."

A shadow of a purr escaped her, a sound that was both a comfort and a goodbye. "I'm so proud of you... don't ever forget that."

And with that, her body relaxed, the last flicker of life fading from her eyes as she slumped against the ground, still and silent.

A strangled cry tore from Dusk's throat as they buried their face in her fur, sobs wracking their body. "No, please... please don't go..."

Reed reached out, pulling Dusk into his embrace, letting them cling to him as they broke down, the weight of the world pressing down on them. His voice was soft, his touch gentle, offering comfort as best he could.

"I'm so sorry, Dusk," he murmured, his own voice thick with sorrow. "I'm so, so sorry."

Dusk's sobs echoed through the blood-stained clearing, a heart-wrenching lament that seemed to pierce even the stars above. For the first time in moons, Dusk had found a proper family, a place they belonged, only for it to be stripped away from them by the brute who killed their mother.

Dusk was numb, staring at the body of the cat who'd given her a chance, when they heard the thrumming of pawsteps approaching. It was Hawkflight, his eyes widening with horror as he took in the

scene. He staggered to a halt, his gaze fixed on his sister's lifeless form, devastation written across his face.

"No... Poppypool...no..." he whispered, his voice cracking. His grief quickly morphed into fury, a rage that burned with an intensity Dusk had rarely seen.

Dusk's voice was shaky as they tried to explain, "She went after Gravel... she fought so hard, Hawkflight. Hickorytree was with her, but... he killed her."

The agony in Hawkflight's gaze sharpened into a fierce resolve as his head snapped up. Across the battlefield, Gravel loomed over a battered and bleeding Hickorytree, ready to deliver the final blow. Hawkflight's claws unsheathed, his eyes flashing with unrestrained anger. "Gravel!"

Without another word, Hawkflight charged, his powerful muscles propelling him forward like a storm. Reed, who had been comforting Dusk, leapt to join him, his eyes dark with determination. Gravel's head snapped up, surprised, but before he could react, Hawkflight's claws were already tearing into him. Reed struck from the other side, and together they overwhelmed the rogue leader, claws and teeth flashing in the moonlight.

Gravel fought back savagely, but he was already weakened, and the combined strength of Hawkflight and Reed proved too much. With one final strike, Gravel collapsed to the ground, defeated. His body lay still, and silence fell over the battlefield.

Dusk stood motionless, watching as Hawkflight and Reed took a step back, their fur bristling, their breaths coming in ragged gasps. Hickorytree, though badly injured, managed to stagger up, his face weary but relieved.

"It's over," Hawkflight rasped, his voice barely above a whisper, yet filled with an undeniable finality. He glanced back at Dusk, his expression softening as he saw the young cat standing over Poppypool's body. His eyes were filled with a sorry so deep, it seemed endless.

But as Dusk's gaze drifted across the camp, they saw that not all of the rogues had fled. Ridge, Scorch, and Snarl lay among the fallen, their twisted expressions frozen in death. But three other rogues– Vine, Flint, and Pine– stood huddled together, their bodies covered in scratches and bites, staring around them with hollow eyes.

The Clan cats closed in, ready to finish the fight. Dusk stepped forward, heart hammering as they called out, "Wait!"

The warriors halted, turning to look at them in confusion, but Dusk's focus was on her former rogue-mates. They took a deep breath, stepping closer. "Look around you. Look at what's happened here. Is this the life you wanted?" Their voice shook with emotion. "Fighting, killing... taking from cats who did nothing to you?"

The three rogues exchanged glances, uncertain, but Dusk pressed on. "Gravel told you that this was the only way, but look at where it led. Poppypool showed me a different life. She took me in, showed me kindness, gave me a chance even when she had every reason not to. The Clan she loved– GlacierClan– they're not your enemy. Gravel was wrong about them."

Vine shifted on her paws, looking uncomfortable, but something in her expression softened. "But... where do we go now? We have nothing left."

Dusk's voice grew steadier, firmer. "Come back with us. The Clan is... it's nothing like anything Gravel told you. There's loyalty, but there's also trust, support, and strength without violence. You don't have to live this way, always looking for the next fight."

Flint looked uncertain, his gaze flickering between Dusk and the Clan cats surrounding them. "But... can we really just leave all of this behind? What if we're not accepted?"

Dusk stepped closer, meeting his gaze with unwavering determination. "I wasn't sure if I'd be accepted, either. But I took a chance. They gave me one, and I know they'll give you one too. If you're willing to change, to stand beside us rather than against us, there's a place for you in GlacierClan."

For a long, tense moment, the rogues were silent, each of them lost in their own thoughts. Finally, Vine stepped forward, her eyes hardened with resolve. "If there's a chance for something better... if Poppypool believed in you, they maybe we can believe in you too." She nodded, glancing at Flint and Pine. "We'll come with you."

Dusk's heart swelled with relief as they gave the slightest nod of gratitude, murmuring, "Thank you."

The Clan cats relaxed, their hostility melting into a cautious acceptance as they stepped aside to allow the rogues to join their ranks. Dusk felt a pang in their heart as they looked back at Poppypool's body, but their spirit felt just a bit lighter. They had saved these rogues and brought them a chance for something better– a small victory, but one Poppypool would have been proud of.

And with her memory guiding them, Dusk knew that they would keep fighting for that brighter future.

Chapter 35

The trek back to GlacierClan felt endless, weighed down by the silence of loss. Dusk's eyes stung, not just from exhaustion but from the emotions that clawed at their heart– Poppypool's final words, her gentle gaze, the warmth of her fur was now gone forever. Reed walked beside them, his pelt brushing Dusk's as if trying to ground them. Around them, the warriors carried their fallen Clanmates with quiet reverence.

When they finally arrived at camp, Sparrowstar leaped onto Highbranch, her voice a soft, steady call. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather for a Clan meeting," she called. The gathered cats looked on, grief and awe filling the camp as the Clan began to gather.

Dusk felt Reed give them a reassuring nudge as they settled, but it didn't ease the weight in their chest.

As the last few cats gathered, Sparrowstar's voice broke through the silence, her tone respectful and filled with quiet sorrow. "Tonight, we remember our fallen." She let the words settle, glancing down with a gaze filled with sorrow and respect. "Aspenleaf, Troutstream, Hatchdrop, Lizardberry, Hawkstripe, Frozenshell, Ivorywhisker, Sandyfrost, Nettlefoot, Talonclaw..."

Each name hung heavy in the air, rippling through the crowd with a collective flinch. Dusk felt their heart twist painfully as Sparrowstar reached the last name, her voice barely above a whisper.

"And... Poppypool."

A hush fell over the camp, a silence filled with grief and disbelief. Dusk felt their throat tighten, blinking back tears as the familiar name echoed through the clearing. Around them, cats looked down, some closing their eyes, others shifting their paws.

Sparrowstar raised her head, her eyes glowing with quiet pride. "They lost their lives defending our Clan, as true warriors would. They showed loyalty, bravery, and love for their Clanmates." She glanced at the bodies laid out, her voice growing firmer. "And with their deaths, we must find a way to carry on. New warriors have risen among us, cats who chose GlacierClan even when their paws walked a different path; one against us. Vine, Flint, Pine, and Reed."

Dusk looked over at Reed as he straightened, his gaze steady. Vine, Flint, and Pine did the same, looking nervous but resolved. They stood under Sparrowstar's watchful gaze, their expression a blend of pride and uncertainty.

"I name you Vineclaw, Flintpatch, Pinefur, and Reedpaw," Sparrowstar continued, nodding at each of them. "Pikedive will be your mentor, Reedpaw. I have no doubt of your skill in battle, but the four of you must learn the ways of Clanlife and our rules. May you serve your Clan with strength and loyalty, and may your courage honor those we have lost."

The crowed murmured, some even managing small, approving nods. Dusk couldn't help feeling a glimmer of pride for their former rogue-mates, watching as Vineclaw dipped her head to Sparrowstar, her eyes shining with respect.

Sparrowstar's gaze turned to Dusk, who felt a sudden spike of nerves. Her voice softened, filling the air with a warmth that eased some of the tension in Dusk's chest. "Before she died, Poppypool came to me with a request."

The Clan shifted, some casting curious looks at Dusk, who swallowed and glanced back at Sparrowstar, bewildered.

"She asked me to give a certain cat a place among us, to honor their loyalty and the love she saw in their heart." Sparrowstar's eyes met Dusk's with a gentle glow. "Dusk, Poppypool believed in you with every fiber of her being, and I believe in you, too."

Dusk felt their throat tighten, heart pounding as Sparrowstar spoke their name with a reverence they hadn't expected.

"From this moment forward, you will be known as Duskpaw," Sparrowstar continued, her voice swelling with warmth. "Newtflake will be your mentor. Poppypool cared deeply for both of you, and I have no doubt her spirit will guide you."

The clearing erupted into murmurs and Dusk*paw* absorbed the weight of their new name. They looked over at Newtflake, who stepped forward, his eyes filled with pride and sadness. "I'll do my best to teach you," he whispered, his voice hoarse as he touched his nose to Duskpaw's forehead. "She would be so proud of you."

Duskpaw's chest tightened, tears stinging their eyes as they managed a nod. "I'll try, Newtflake. I won't let her down."

Newtflake's eyes softened, his tail curling around them. "I know you won't."

As the meeting concluded, the Clan's mournful silence felt lighter, as if Poppypool's memory lingered with them, giving them strength. Duskpaw felt a gentle breeze brush their fur, looking up at the stars glittering in the sky.

A whisper of peace settled over the camp, and Duskpaw closed their eyes, feeling, for the first time, like they truly belonged.